
THE INTANGIBLES OF GRASS FARMING

BY MIKE BERETTA



When Michael Pollan wrote “You are what you eat eats too” in his newest book, *In Defense of Food: An Eater’s Manifesto*, he affirmed a movement that draws on the centuries-old methods of grass farming. This awareness of the link between the animals we eat and what they consumed during their lives has fostered a sense of connectedness that has inspired consumers and farmers alike. Grass-fed beef has been at the cornerstone of this movement and has engaged ranchers, butchers, retailers and marketers in their quest to tell the best story and sway the customer in their direction.

The list of benefits is a long one, and the grass-fed story is supported by many tangibles. Included in the list are things like less fat, more omega-3 fatty acids, more conjugated linoleic acids (CLA), more vitamin E and higher levels of beta-carotene. Grass feeding has the support of environmentally responsible retailers and butchers who have highlighted the artisanal qualities associated with smaller-scale grass farms and their role within the local food movement. The benefits of raising cattle on pasture have greatly assisted in promoting the beef and have given credence to the grass-fed cause, but there are other less black and white benefits outside the realm of research that I feel are as powerful a comment on the beauty of pasture-based farming as any of the above.

These benefits are what I would like to call the “intangibles.” They are not supported by any study and are difficult to explain on paper (hence, not the marketing ideal!), and yet I feel that, more than anything else related to grass farming, they drive the future of the movement. I have split these into two categories, one specific to the cattle and one to the farmer.

At the risk of sounding corny, grass farming helps keep the cattle happier. How do I know this? From relying on my senses and observing the cattle’s behavior. A clear example of this is when we move cattle from one field to another during the pasture rotation. As I call them and prepare to open the gate from one field to the next, the animals gather, mooing and calling out in such a bovine cacophony that no animal within a mile could not hear their glee. They run into the next field that is lush with re-growth, and the cows actually leap and click their heels as they dance around until abruptly stopping and commencing to graze. (This has to be experienced; I do it no justice by describing it.) The new field excites them not only because of its untapped potential and new views and smells, but it also offers them a slightly new smorgasbord of grasses than the previous field. This variety in their diet is a cause for joy and for health. The cows are happier. I may not be able to prove it, but I can feel it.

The other category of intangible benefits relates directly to the farmer. This may seem somewhat of a selfish argument, but if grass farming only has advantages for the cattle and the consumer of the beef, then it is not sustainable. For it to survive beyond trendiness, the farmer needs to be rewarded. Yes, financial rewards are important, but equally so is the farmers’ own sense of fulfillment in that what they are doing is relevant and meaningful. This is a benefit of grass-farming that no lab would be able to substantiate.

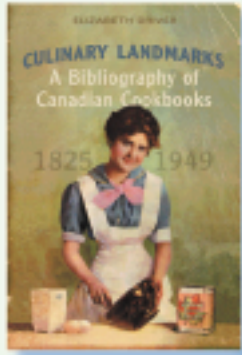
Raising cattle on grass requires a heightened sense of awareness. It demands sensitivity towards the animals as we seek to listen to their needs

and, in doing so, makes us know the true meaning of accountability. In this system, we answer to ourselves and the cattle and the playing field that nature provides. It is a farmer-friendly system and, as such, a people-friendly one as well. Our children can participate in the ebb and flow of the cattle throughout the year instead of being relegated to watching the animals in barnyards and feedlots where machinery, cramped animals and an unhealthy environment do not encourage them to participate. The more involved people become, the more fulfilling it is for the farmer. A farmer who is rewarded for his efforts in growing good food is as important to the system as the health of the cattle.

If the grass-farming movement hopes to one day add this list of intangible benefits to its marketing and sales strategy, it will need to build a sense of trust between the consumer and the farmer. It is impossible for everyone to experience the joy of watching cows dance as they move into new pastures or hearing children coming back from checking the cattle in the field, bursting with stories; you just have to know it is so. These intangible benefits are real, and they reside in the gut of the farmer, just like the grass in the stomachs of our cattle. □

Mike Beretta, pictured at left, is an ex-professional soccer player turned farmer/butcher. He and his wife Cynthia have owned Beretta Organic Farms and Beretta Ranch, located in King City, Ontario, for the past fifteen years. The photo on page 17 was taken on his ranch.


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