

Bees for Beef

Let me tell you about Certified Naturally Grown Bees, and Beef

Jennifer Berry

“Environmentalist, naturalist, tree hugger, preservationist, eagle freak, greenie, anti-pollutionist, ecologist,” and “green geek” are some of the terms used to describe those concerned with protecting the environment. Often, they refer to people working in some capacity to solve environmental issues such as population growth and pollution, for example. I find it interesting that, prior to 1962, these terms did not exist. It was only after Rachael Carson’s novel, *“Silent Spring,”* was published, that the environmental movement began. Since that time, the movement has sprouted, grown, and took on a life of its own.

As the human population continues to increase, more and more food must be produced in order to feed the masses. However, with such rapid growth, humans are exhausting the world’s land base. As land is consumed for non-agricultural needs or overworked and overgrazed, this resource is in jeopardy. Hence, day after day researchers and farmers are working to find better ways to cultivate the land so that at harvest time, yields are at their peak; it’s a constant struggle to improve land-use efficiency. Another struggle is to achieve this while decreasing the cost of production. One thing is

for sure, there is only so much land, and we ain’t making any more. “Land is the only thing in the world worth workin’ for, worth fightin’ for, worth dyin’ for, because it’s the only thing that lasts,” goes the saying.

Since the end of World War II, populations have flourished along with technology. This has given rise to industry-standard, monocultural farming. Some examples are the vast acres of corn, soybeans and wheat fields that consume miles of America’s heartland. Given such advances, in the past, the small, local farmer all but disappeared, only to survive in the paintings of Norman Rockwell. While large farming systems efficiently produce massive amounts of food, I ask, “But, at what price to

humans and the environment?” Desertification, salinization, loss of biodiversity, depletion of ground water and eradication of genetic diversity are just a few of the issues that have surfaced over the years.

Another concern is the pollution of soil and water. With a whole landscape sowed with the same crop, pest and disease populations can rapidly explode infesting and infecting virtually everything overnight. So, pesticide use is a must! Insecticides are used to kill the insects that devour the food. Herbicides are used to kill the weeds that compete for precious resources and fertilizers are used to grow the food-bearing plants big and strong. Granted, the use of these chemicals has enabled great gains in food productivity over the years, but, again, I ask, “At what risk to humans and the environment?”

It is understood that with the growing population on this planet, organic or alternative agricultural operations cannot feed all the inhabitants. However, these farms are growing by leaps and bounds all across the country. Over the years, many people have gained a better understanding of how the food they consume is grown, harvested, processed and packaged. With this knowledge, they’re making better-informed decisions about what to buy and from whom, as evidenced by the appearance of more organic and local products in

larger supermarkets, led by, of all stores, Wal-Mart.

For a food product to be labeled “organic” it must have been produced, handled and stored without the use of any synthetic chemicals. Plus, the land in which it was grown must have been chemical free for more than three years. There are other rules and regulations that must be adhered to in order to receive the label, which is why it’s almost impossible for honey to be labeled organic. This is not because of the beekeepers’ practices, but where the bees themselves fly. Bees do not discriminate between organic and non-organic fields. They forage in areas that provide the biggest bang for the buck. So, unless our bees’ flight range is completely encompassed by a pristine area,



Annie and Nolan Kennedy with Certified Naturally Grown beehives.



Happy cow (steer actually).

free of insecticides, fungicides, herbicides, or genetically modified organisms, then, the “Organic” label will always be just outside of our grasp. Yet there’s still hope!

The closest to an organic certification, that MOST beekeepers can get, is a grassroots program called Certified Naturally Grown, or CNG, which is modeled after the *Participatory Guarantee Systems* or PGS. PGS is a peer-review certification program of over 10,000 farmers, primarily outside the US, which has been in practice for decades. PGS recognizes organic practices yet draws upon local resources, as opposed to relying on large bureaucratic organizations, to inspect and educate. This avoids frustration, excessive paperwork and high fees.

Certified Naturally Grown started as an alternative to the USDA National Organic Program and, since its inception in 2002, has begun to sprout across the U.S. The program caters to the small-scale farmer, who sells products locally at farmers markets, roadside stands, restaurants, and through community supported agriculture (CSA) farms. It is a brilliant choice for beekeepers since it offers a common sense option to the organic standard. Plus, there are less restrictions and costs involved.

The process for being certified as CNG is quite simple. First, go to www.naturallygrown.org and read the requirements for the certification. These are basic, common sense approaches to keeping bees (treatments for pests, apiary location, feeding, comb removal, etc). If your apiary practices meet the requirements, you will want to connect with several beekeepers in your area who are also committed to natural beekeeping methods. Next, you will need to fill out the application on line. After your application has been accepted, you will receive a declaration by mail along with information about the program and the annual contribution. Finally, you will have your apiary inspected by a beekeeper whom you know and, with success, become a member of the CNG community.

I became a member a few months back and am proud to be a part of this organization.

Last year, I was asked by a local beekeeping family to certify their apiary as CNG. It was the first apiary certification for the state of Georgia; so, I was excited to be apart of the process. Annie and Nolan Kennedy along with their three children, live on a farm outside of the small town, Colbert, Georgia.

Annie and Nolan met while attending school at Texas A&M. After graduation, Nolan went into USAF pilot training program. He eventually became a F-16 flight instructor. Years later, this training lead him to a career as a Delta pilot, a job he continues today. Annie worked in the Human Health Division of Merck industries as a Pharmaceutical Representative until she retired. They remained in Texas until Delta transferred Nolan from Dallas to Atlanta. They opted for the farm in the country as opposed to the overcrowded, polluted madness of Atlanta.

Annie and Nolan began to explore living a healthier lifestyle when their youngest daughter was diagnosed with food allergies and autoimmune disorder. What they discovered in the grocery stores was not to their liking. Meats, dairy and eggs were full of hormones, antibiotics and other chemicals. Very little-to-no organic vegetables were available, but there were plenty of processed foods loaded with ingredients they no longer wanted to feed their family. So, they decided to take matters into their own hands and make a move back to the basics with not just their food, but their environment as well.

Covenant Valley Farms, the name of their farm, is the place they call home. At first, they had no intention of having more than just a few horses, but this proved not to be enough. As time went on, the population of the farm began to expand. First, a rooster named Michael Angelo needed rescuing. Next, they got, chickens, sheep, cattle, bees, and, finally, turkeys. The farm has become a full time job, but one they love.

The Kennedy’s cattle are a mixed-breed of Angus. They have better immunity and resistance to common ailments versus the commercial stock widely-used today. Hence, there’s no need for injections of antibiotics. Further, the fields where the cattle graze are not treated with synthetic pesticides, herbicides or fertilizers, which is one reason why their stock is also Certified Naturally Grown.

The Kennedy’s cattle are grass fed, which is what nature intended. Most beef operations will “sweeten” cattle for 60-120 days (some, actually, for their entire lives) on grain (predominantly corn) to add additional fat before they are slaughtered. Unfortunately, a cow’s stomach is not designed to digest corn. Once on a corn diet, the cow becomes “sick;” this is one reason why antibiotics are continually fed. Grain feeding also promotes the growth of *E. coli*, which is another reason why such cattle must be fed antibiotics. Finally, cramming 100’s to 1000’s of potentially diseased animals into small areas (stockyards) can be a recipe for disaster.

Another debate circulating the country is the use of hormones within the meat and dairy industries. In recent years, there have been many questions and concerns about the effects of these hormones on people eating beef and drinking milk. During their life, cows are fed or injected hormones to accelerate their growth and make them more “beefy,” so to say. These hormones are the same

muscle-building androgens (testosterone) that nefarious athletes consume. Dairy cows are also fed hormones in order to increase milk production; traces of which are detected in the meat and milk. But, what may be more disturbing is the amount of these hormones finding their way into water sources (rivers, streams, creeks, ponds, lakes). Waste from the cows runs off into waterways and eventually make it into our drinking water. So, how is this affecting our health or the health of the environment?

The industry has modeled this current system of raising cattle to be more cost effective, which is why beef in this country is so cheap compared to other parts of the world. Plus, American consumers have grown accustomed to the fat-marbled meat which has been produced for decades. However, meat from grass fed cattle has about one-half to one-third less fat. It is lower in calories and is much higher in vitamin E, omega-3 fatty acids, and a beneficial fat called linoleic acid (CLA), which supposedly reduces the risk of cancer.

Folks raise cattle unconventionally, and buy the beef as well, to minimize the risk of contracting deadly diseases like Mad Cow and Foot and Mouth. Plus, it greatly reduces the chance of being exposed to E. coli infections, which kill people each year in this country. Some feedlots not only feed grain to cattle, but feed the animal remains of horses, and pigs, as well. Also, in his book, *“Fast Food Nation,”* Eric Schlosser reports that about one quarter of minced beef sold in this country is made from worn-out dairy cattle, which are likely to be riddled with disease and antibiotic residues.

Journalist and food researcher Michael Pollan explains that, “...the chronic diseases that now kill most of us can be traced directly to the industrialization of our food: the rise of highly processed foods and refined grains; the use of chemicals to raise plants and animals in huge monocultures; the superabundance of cheap calories of sugar and fat produced by modern agriculture; and the narrowing of the biological diversity of the human diet to a tiny handful of staple crops, notably wheat, corn and soy. This loss of nutrients (and replacement by superabundant yet non-nutritious calories) has contributed to the rise in chronic degenerative diseases in humans over the last 60 years.” (Pollan, 2008)

Back at the farm, while sitting down and chatting with the Kennedys, we actually did some bartering. I purchased ½ a steer in exchange for five nucs and five queens. Not bad. It is more expensive than what you find at the grocery store, but, for me, I’m willing to spend more for fresh, local, organic, or CNG food because I BELIEVE it is healthier, better tasting, grown with a respect to animals and the environment. It also makes me feel good. But, something that I find ironic is that natural foods usually contain fewer ingredients; they are just common, everyday, simple fare. The fancy-dancy, premixed, fast cooking, dinner in a bag, box, or plastic tub is cheaper than the real thing because the chemicals and additives are cheap to create and easy to apply. Next time you are at the store, read some of the labels from a few organic products and compare them to their “fast food” counterparts. Interesting read!

Annie and Nolan believe in food quality over quantity. They want to raise the animals humanely and with as little impact to the environment as possible. They want the food that they eat, feed to their children, and sell to



Annie holding a baby chicken which will soon be supplying eggs for the family.

their customers to be like yesteryear: full of nutrients, but not artificial, four to 12 syllabled ingredients that nobody can pronounce.

“Thank you,” to all the small, local farmers out there like the Kennedys! Glad you’re no longer just a memory. **BC**

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