

Stewardculture

magazine review

Polyfaces: The Film

Documentary delivers message that needed change in food system is at hand

Despite having a compelling subject to shoot – Joel Salatin and the extended family of his farm – the filmmakers of *Polyfaces: The Film* convey something more important. What I took away more than anything else was the key message that consumers are a sleeping giant who, if awakened to truth about humans and food, can change the face of agriculture in the U.S. and around the world.

Opening the film, Lisa Heenan, producer and co-director, said, “Consumers make choices every day. And they have more power than they realize to change the way food is produced. We can regenerate our landscapes, communities, economies, our health, and most importantly, our soils by becoming more conscious as consumers.”

Invoking Mark Twain, Heenan’s husband and famous regenerative farm designer, Darren Doherty introduces the audience to the film’s subject in a dinner speech. Doherty quotes, “Today’s radicals are tomorrow’s conservatives.”

I see this as hopeful prophesy on Doherty’s part because what is taking place on Polyface Farms near Swoope, Virginia, led by Salatin and his son Daniel is nothing short of heresy to large industrial agribusiness and their Washington lobby, but what Doherty and others seek to be the norm in the near future.

Shot and edited wonderfully in traditional documentary style, it becomes easy for the audience to get caught up in the operation of what goes on at Polyface Farms. The people are compelling, the animals are compelling, the landscape is compelling. If the viewer allows it, they can be distracted from the key message about consumer choice because the story of the successful operation of one farm and its charismatic leader is captivating.

So what are the consumer changes the filmmakers are trying to communicate? In short, for people to take on a mindfulness of food.

According to a USDA factbook, U.S. producers in 2000 provided the equivalent of “3,800 calories of food per person per day.” That’s an increase of 500 calories above the 1970 level. These calories are produced, in large part, in an unsustainable way, according to Doherty. What is needed, the film helps us understand, is that consumers can change agriculture by demanding those calories be produced differently. And, the filmmakers show us the example of the kind of regenerative agriculture that can be employed to supply these sustainably produced calories to an informed consumer base that is willing to even pay just a bit more for it.

Author, speaker and food expert Michael Pollan, an important subject in the film, helps the audience make the connection between food and agriculture and reinforces the idea that a different agriculture than is practiced at scale today can supply nutrient-dense and healthful food. In referring to Polyface Farms’ approach, Pollan said, “The idea that we can take beautiful food off the land and heal it at the same time and sequester carbon and create more soil, create better soil, that’s a very hopeful lesson. Because it’s bigger than

food or farming. It suggests that as long as the sun shines, there is a free lunch. That you can capture that energy and run it through a system and not diminish the world.”

Another farmer featured in the film who lives near Polyface Farms has observed first hand that the change can be made. He is now adopting on his own farm the planned grazing techniques the Salatins employ. We’ll call him Neighbor Oakley. Though he does seem to be convinced the techniques are the way to go, it’s clear he had to get to that point of understanding which apparently took some time. He said, “I think Joel’s way is going to be the future. Someone is going to have to open our eyes and say ‘what he’s doing is great and it’s building our country back up.’” I believe Heenan, Doherty and co-director, Isaabella Doherty, have said exactly that.

Doherty gives us a summary of what’s being portrayed. “Polyface methods can be applied to other farms. The environmental footprint of these regenerative farms is so much more positive than the pollution of industrial agriculture. It gives us hope that if more farmers pursue these common sense farming methods that it will stop being seen as radical, and these beautiful ecologically beneficial food systems will become the new normal.” Along with showing us the beauty of Polyface Farms, the filmmakers have also shown that consumers will make a choice in favor of these farmers because the food is better and the process to produce the food is regenerative rather than degenerative.

Will every farmer change? No. And Pollan points that out in the film. But, there is hope because there is a generation of people who are interested in farming in this way. “There are plenty of young people arriving at Polyface wanting to farm, wanting to farm in more regenerative ways,” Doherty said.

During the annual field day hosted on Polyface Farms, consumers get a first-hand look at how food is produced on such an operation. And in a glimmer of future-looking hope Miss Doherty’s camera captures a child catching a chicken and exclaiming proudly to those within earshot, “Look what I can do!” Look what I can do, indeed. Out of the mouth of this babe is the nugget of truth of just how powerful people can be if they understand where and how healthful and delicious food can be produced in a way that enhances the landscape.

The filmmakers have set it before us. They laid it out and now, in effect, are saying “it’s up to you!”

Polyfaces: The Film

<http://www.polyfaces.com/>

Producer and co-director: Lisa Heenan

Original concept: Darren Doherty

Co-director, director of photography: Isaabella Doherty

Editor: Bergen O’Brien

Available:

- video on demand Dec. 25, 2015 at polyfaces.com

- DVD/Blu-ray Dec. 25, 2015 at polyfaces.com