



ONE EVENING, six months before the pandemic lockdown began, Angus McIntosh stood barefoot in front of a TEDx audience in Johannesburg and spoke about how he went from being a ‘big swinging dick’ investment banker in London to farming in Stellenbosch.

If you didn’t know him, you might have mistaken him for a younger Al Pacino: full of brio and a touch of swagger, same eyes and jawline, though his tan was unmistakably made under the Western Cape sun. Apart from his mic, he wore nothing but his customary knee-length shorts and a T-shirt emblazoned with a sequence of letters arranged like a protest slogan across his front torso:

GMO

OMG

WTF

are we eating?

Then he held aloft a tie – a Rudolph Moshammer bought during his stockbroking days from the original Munich boutique – and put it around his neck as a symbol of the person he’d been in his twenties. ‘At Goldman Sachs, I’d drunk the Kool-Aid. I believed it didn’t matter what you eat, what you think, what you drink, what you do – because there’s a pill to fix everything.’

Five years later, he still speaks with all the candour and steely resolve of a smooth-talking Pacino about how and why he became a crusader for regenerative farming, an alternative agricultural practice that continues to fly under the radar for most South Africans. You might know him as Farmer Angus; maybe his meat and eggs, bone broth and collagen even form part of your regular grocery haul. If you do, you’re part of a sliver-sized minority who’ve tasted the difference and perhaps felt the impact on your own body of eating the meat-made-differently that McIntosh rears and sells.

This year, he added wine to his portfolio, made as naturally as possible from grapes grown with minimal interference, and bottled sans chemicals and sans intervention.

Whether you heard him that night, speaking about why he does what he does, or you’ve met him at Spier for one of his personalised farm tours, chances are he’ll have made a convert of you. Having spat out the Kool-Aid, McIntosh believes we’re in the midst of a global health pandemic – and that changing the way food is produced is key to our salvation.

He reckons he’s spent the last 20 years unlearning everything he was taught in the first 30, and he unflinchingly believes that there are only two types of farmers: destructive farmers and regenerative farmers.

‘Agriculture is a binary situation,’ he says. ‘You’re either regenerating your land or you’re destroying your land. You can’t sit on the fence.’

It’s why the word ‘sustainable’ is banned on his farm. That’s nothing against the aspirations of environmental crusaders who bandy the word around, but he says he ‘cannot think of one thing in this world today that we need to sustain’. Whether it’s human health or ecological health, he

says, radical improvements are required and only regenerative farming adequately addresses those requirements.

Big talk from a man who is fundamentally opposed to wearing shoes. In fact, the only time he does is when he has to go into town (‘dirty places’) or when he’s riding his motorbike to get around his farm. ‘I’m too scared of coming off without shoes on,’ he says.

While being barefoot is a way of ‘earthing’, a practice he picked up from a book about connecting with Earth’s frequency, he says it’s also simply the natural way to go. Like his farm, his lifestyle is organic, back to basics, rooted in what nature intended. ‘Biomechanically, being barefoot is nature’s design,’ he says, citing a cascade of negative consequences on human physiology that arise from wearing shoes. ‘Whatever we can do by design, we should be doing by design.’

When he started farming his parcel of land at Spier in 2008, McIntosh saw first-hand the result of working against nature’s design. The land had been destroyed by monoculture agriculture. ‘For seven years straight, these guys grew only carrots. Nature attacks a monoculture like that. The only way monocrops are kept alive is through a toxic combination of artificial fertilisers, herbicides, pesticides, fungicides, larvicides, you name it. So, they managed to keep it going with poisons that killed everything in the soil.’

He says the land was ‘desolate’, covered in the kind of sand that blows away in the wind and lets rainwater seep right through. ‘The earth had no smell, because it was dead.’ Aside from *duiweltjies*, pretty much nothing grew.

‘For the first two years, the soil was sickly yellow, homogenous, like beach sand.’ Fast forward 15 years and the land’s undergone a radical transformation. ‘It’s like a forest floor,’ he says, ‘humic and fecund.’

McIntosh doesn’t use chemical fertilisers, doesn’t keep living creatures in factory-style confinement centres, doesn’t inoculate his cows with antibiotics. His methodology is simply to allow his animals to do their thing. His hens famously live in large mobile homes that are moved daily so that when they go out to forage, they do so on a different patch of land to where they explored yesterday.

On visits to his farm, you can witness first-hand the results of letting animals roam freely. His pigs are raised out in the open, allowed to snuffle around and do what pigs like to do. His cattle are moved between pastures, so they spread their manure across different patches of land, fertilising the ground by trampling their own excrement back into the soil. This natural composting produces a biodynamic loop that improves soil health and increases the ground’s water-carrying capacity by sequestering carbon into the earth.

Spier was the first farm in the world to be paid carbon credits for restoring carbon to the soil in the pastures where the beef cattle graze. ‘If every farm in the country pulled as much carbon into its soils per year as we do, then South Africa would pull in three times more CO₂ than

we emit as a nation,' McIntosh says. He believes if all our farmers focused on building their soil in this way, there'd be no drought.

He says it's entirely possible to address climate change using regenerative agriculture. And, because it's heavily labour-dependent, it would significantly raise employment. 'Lots of people working as opposed to machines,' he says.

More than anything, though, he believes shifting to this more natural way of farming is vital if there's to be enough healthy, nutrient-rich food for a global population that's on track to reach nine billion by 2050. 'These people will need to be fed, but the food system of conventional farming doesn't nourish the world. It pollutes the world and makes humans sick.'

It does so, he says, using practices most of us pretend not to know about. 'The food industry does not want us to know how our food is produced. Most people choose the ignorance-is-bliss strategy regarding their food. They don't want to know because it's too scary.'

Over and above the ethics of factory farming, McIntosh argues that feedlot-raised animals are fed an unnatural diet that perpetuates what he calls our 'species-wide suicide'.

'Cows are herbivores, not granivores,' he says, explaining that when bovines are fed a grain diet, it violates their digestive system, causing the wrong fats to metabolise, resulting in an inflammatory 'omega-6 overload'.

'In order to cope with the problem of perpetually sick feedlot animals, antibiotics are routinely issued to these confined animals.' This, he says, is the primary driver of human antibiotic resistance, a major global health catastrophe, according to the World Health Organization.

Outspoken as he may be, harmony is at the core of Angus McIntosh's regenerative farming ethos; harmony with nature and a deep respect for every creature and the important role it plays in keeping the farm in balance – yes, down to the humblest of hens.



Even if health isn't an issue for you, you might be swayed by your tastebuds. 'Conventional beef is all on the same diet,' McIntosh says. 'Apart from being rammed with antibiotics and asthma drugs, they're all eating the same corn. Of course, it's going to be bland.'

He says that allowing cows to graze in pastures fertilised by free-roaming animals creates a very different kind of animal, one whose meat is delicious. 'If an animal has only eaten grass off a specific farm, there'll be a unique flavour. That's the terroir of the farm. It's not the homogenous, blended flavour of an unnatural grain diet.'

Try telling that to the juggernaut of Big Food and the vast, rapacious and incredibly profitable system it perpetuates, though. 'I'm a niche player, and those industrial farmers have humongous tractors with which they plough fields that reach from horizon to horizon. They have small margins, but because they do such large scales, they make money. And, in the process, they take the life out of the soil.'

Still, he says, he does what he does because 'it's the right thing to do', an 'act of self-preservation' for himself and his family, certainly not in the interests of his bank balance. 'People ask, "How do you go from being a stockbroker to a regenerative farmer?" It wasn't a Damascene conversion. It was one small thing that led to another, a series of cracks in the edifice, learning how poisoned the food world is, and maybe my rural upbringing.'

McIntosh spent much of his childhood on farms in KwaZulu-Natal. His father was a beef farmer who became an opposition MP, known as the 'Peter Pan of politics', a tireless thorn in the side of the apartheid government, known for outspokenly pointing out the moral vacuity of the ruling party.

Not only did McIntosh inherit his father's gift of the gab but he has his unflagging spirit too. Hearing him speak, you're left with little doubt that, like those toes of his which are so unwilling to be shackled by shoes, he's uncontainable. There's a refusal to back down in the face of adversity, even if the odds are stacked against him.

He's driven by wanting his children to inherit a world that's healthier than the one we've got. 'Maybe it's a pipe dream to think this change can be made. But it's super depressing thinking about what's ahead if we don't change. That's why I bother. Because I'm not going to let these f**kers win.'

For those of us who aren't farmers, McIntosh says there are three things we should do. One is to be more mindful about what we eat – and consider who we've assigned, by proxy, to be our farmer.

The second thing is to switch off our cellphones as much as possible. 'Engage on a human-to-human basis,' he says. 'People are so awesome one-on-one.'

And thirdly, take off your shoes, he says. Stay grounded. ▽

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