

Two Canadian CLASSICS



Bill Sheard (above centre), with his son William, left, and his wife, Sheila.



Canadian beef and Canadian whisky have more than great flavour in common — they are part of a collaboration that enhances sustainability for both.

PICTURE A SMALL HERD being walked through the area that is now Toronto Pearson International Airport, and even crossing over Eglinton Avenue. It would be impossible today, but in the 1940s William Sheard Senior rode his bicycle ahead of the family's cattle to take them to market at the Toronto stockyards.

Today his son, third-generation farmer Bill Sheard, carries on the family tradition of beef farming, including an ingenious sustainability initiative his father started in the 1960s. He started using distillers grain in his cattle feed, a corn mash by-product from the production of Canadian whisky and other spirit-based products. It's a way of recycling what would otherwise be food waste.

Topics like sustainability and climate change are so often in the news today you'd think the 21st century invented them, but, "It's been going on forever," says Sheard, who raises more than 3,000 beef cattle a year on Sunnymead Farms near Caledon. Sheard explains that after a distillery mashes, ferments and extracts the alcohol from the corn, the so-called spent grains are still full of energy, protein, vitamins and minerals.

"It's good feed," Sheard says, recalling what his father knew when he bid on the opportunity to take spent grains away from the McGuinness and Gilbey's distilleries operating in west Toronto until the late-1980s. "He got the contract for

50 truck loads a week. Then he made a business of it, selling it to small dairy farmers, with 30-to-50 cow herds, while also feeding four or five loads a week of it" to his own cattle.

Sheard explains that it's very palatable to cattle as feed, and more importantly, "It's a good use of resources. Instead of treating this as waste, this by-product has value as cattle feed, and we reduce environmental impact of both the distiller and the farm." Mixed with silage and hay, it can make up as much as a quarter of the daily feed ration, saving the water, energy and resources that would have been needed to grow the equivalent amount of grain for feed. Even today, Sunnymead Farms works with large ethanol producers to use their spent corn from distilling as part of its cattle feed. "We're using good farming practices and good science to lessen the environmental impact and gain efficiency," Sheard says.

Historic proof of the longstanding partnership sits on a glass shelf in a case at his home: a bottle of McGuinness whisky presented to his father in 1973, the first year a million cases were sold from the distillery that was their partner in sustainability for a quarter-century. "I've never opened it," Sheard says. However, he agrees it would probably taste great stirred into a Canadian whisky Old Fashioned or Manhattan, served next to a juicy Canadian beef steak.

"Using distillers grain reduced the environmental impact of us growing feed for our cattle." – Bill Sheard, Sunnymead Farms farmer



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