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# Q & A

## Will Harris

### White Oak Pastures

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by Lauren Ayers

Do you have a beef with Will Harris? For those who have actually sampled his tender, grass-fed steaks, roasts, and ground beef, the answer is a resounding, "Yes! And we're ready for more!" Recently, White Oak Pastures won the grand prize at the Flavor of Georgia competition for local food purveyors. As more consumers realize how an animal's diet can greatly affect the nutritional content of its meat, they are choosing grass-fed over grain-fed products because of the lower fat content. As the company's Web site explains, "White Oak Pastures works in cooperation with nature to produce premium quality beef that is healthy, nutritious, and good to eat. Care is given to ensure that all of our production practices are economically practical, ecologically sustainable, and that the animals are always humanely treated."

Will's beef is in such high demand that it only made sense to start processing it at his own plant. The only thing that people love more than the beef is the man himself, so it's not surprising that so many people showed up recently to help him celebrate the opening of his new processing plant in Bluffton, Ga.

**Q: What was the best part of the grand opening of your new processing plant?**

**A:** The best part of the day for me, was how rewarding it was to see all the friends I have made, especially from Atlanta. They journeyed all this way, 180 or so miles from Atlanta, to come down here and see how we raise and process our beef and to help us celebrate. All these people that I've gotten to know over the past four or five years went to so much trouble and came this far. The invitation to come visit is extended to all my friends and outlasts this opening. We are always happy to have the opportunity to show our beef because people need to understand the process. We sell our beef and we ask more money for it. It would be arrogant of us to ask customers for more money and not explain to them why it costs more. We all talk a lot about the local food movement and the benefits of buying local, but the consumer can come and see and get to know the person and people who are doing it. It disturbs me to watch sophisticated consumers who are educated and smart, pore over a two-inch-by-two-inch label and try to figure out what's in a product and where it comes from. The power of the local food movement is that people don't have to bother with misleading labels. They can have confidence in what they are buying simply by driving down to Bluffton or wherever.



**Q: What made you decide to open your own processing plant?**

**A:** There is a real shortage of processing capacity in the meat industry and the South in particular. I've been told with all the recent mergers in the beef industry, 90% of the processing capacity will be owned by three large international corporations. There is a terrible shortage of processing availability for independent family farmers in the local food market. The processor who has been working for me is 90 miles away. I really don't like hauling my cattle that far; I'd like for them not to undergo that stress. That particular processor is at his maximum capacity, and my customers have indicated a willingness to buy more beef. I like the idea of having control over the quality aspect of the processing. If I can raise the cow, process the beef, and sell it to a customer, I've taken all those middle men out who add no quality but could potentially be a detriment. My name is on every single package of meat I sell. My reputation and the reputation my family spent 142 years building follows that. I don't want anyone trifling with it.

**Q: It is true that your processing plant will also provide an opportunity for other local ranchers to process their meat?**

**A:** That is correct. This plant is just about as small as you can build one and have everything in it that the USDA requires. It can process 50 to 100 head a week. My farm can only raise about 15 head a week. There is an opportunity for me to give other farmers the chance to process their cattle and market it directly to customers and get their own brand.

**FARMER TALK**

**Q: What do you say to critics who believe that grass-fed meat is a fad?**

**A:** I hope they're wrong. Grass-fed beef is not for everyone. I don't expect grass-fed beef to overtake grain-fed beef in the marketplace. I think it's a fairly small percentage and will stay a small percentage. Grass-fed beef is not for the consumer who wanders the aisles with a calculator in hand, dividing price by ounce. I'd go to war to defend those people's right to do that, but those aren't my customers. My customers tend to be sophisticated consumers who care about humane treatment of the animal, the environmental suitability of their food, and the integrity of independent, family farms in the United States. They believe there is greater health and safety in non-industrial food, and are willing to pay a little more for it. People say it's a fad. I don't think it's a fad, but it's not going to revolutionize the industry. What I do serves a small percentage of informed consumers.

**Q: Where is your meat available?**

**A:** The ground beef is available at Publix. Ground beef, steaks, and roasts are available at Whole Foods and Harry's Farmers Market. You can learn more by visiting our Web site at [www.whiteoakpastures.com](http://www.whiteoakpastures.com).