

Backyard Poultry

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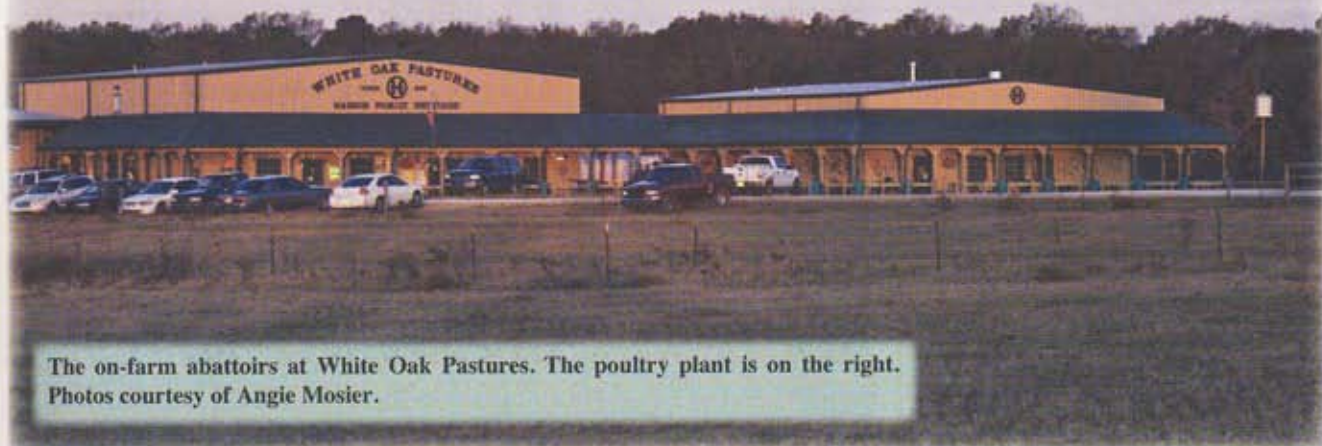
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Supermarket Chicken: A New Model



The on-farm abattoirs at White Oak Pastures. The poultry plant is on the right. Photos courtesy of Angie Mosier.

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Recent years have brought an enormous increase in the number of small farmers producing broilers and other dressed poultry for local markets. For consumers completely dependent on supermarkets to feed their families, however, there has been little choice other than the mediocre, even dangerous output of the industrial poultry giants. Fortunately, since White Oak Pastures in southwest Georgia added poultry to its offerings of beef and lamb, consumers in the Southeast now have supermarket access to high-quality poultry raised on pasture and processed under sanitary conditions.

The story of White Oak Pastures is one of ongoing evolution. It was founded as a beef cattle farm in 1866 by James Edward Harris, great-grandfather of the current owner, Will Harris, and has been operated by successive generations ever since. Together with almost all segments of American agriculture following World War II, Harris's father enthusiastically adopted a new model for beef farming—based on mechanization; use of pesticides and chemical fertilizers; forcing faster growth of cattle with hormone implants and by feeding them corn and soy (laced with antibiotics) in lieu of grass and hay; and on shipping calves to distant feedlots rather than finishing, slaughtering, and distributing them locally.

Harris, who worked with his father

after majoring in animal science at the University of Georgia and eventually took over the farm's management entirely, continued to follow these established paradigms of beef production. But he was more and more troubled by the negative impacts of artificial inputs on his soil and artificial feeding on his cattle, and more and more pained by their inhumane treatment as they endured shipment of up to thirty hours without feed, water, or rest to feedlots in Nebraska and Iowa. In 1995 he abandoned hormone implants, antibiotics, and the feeding of grain, and began a transition to an exclusively grass-fed production model. Rather than shipping feeder calves a thousand miles, he began finishing them on the farm and having them butchered at a local custom abattoir. In 2000 he terminated all use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides on the farm's 2,000 acres (1,000 of them leased). Like many of the most creative farmers of our day, he had concluded that the key to progress may well be a giant step backward, and he returned to raising beef cattle much as his great-grandfather had.

But Harris did not remain bound to a static model from the past. In 2005 he built an on-farm, two-and-a-half-million-dollar USDA-inspected beef abattoir to eliminate the stress of transporting his animals to slaughter elsewhere and to achieve complete control over the final product he offers his customers.

In 2010, Harris installed a 50-kilowatt solar array that saves White Oak thirty to forty percent of energy costs for the

entire farm. (The array will be expanded to generate 100 kilowatts in 2012.) White Oak also uses solar thermal technology to heat the wash down water for its processing facilities.

In 2010 Harris came to see a beef-only farm as monocultural, and added sheep and poultry (initially chickens and turkeys), trying for a closer approximation on the farm of nature itself—what he terms the “Serengeti model”—in which large ruminants are followed by small ruminants, followed in turn by birds, each species filling crucial ecological niches: The cattle thrive on the grasses, the sheep eat the weeds, and the poultry help control insect populations.

More prosaically: The cattle are moved every day, rotating through a series of 20- to 45-acre paddocks defined with high-tensile wire, each paddock containing a watering tank and enough trees to shade the herd. Neither the sheep nor the poultry are confined by the wire, so they range where they please, though they tend to follow the cattle.

Addition of pastured poultry to the mix led in 2011 to the addition of a companion processing plant for poultry.

The Pastured Poultry Mix

Livestock management at White Oak Pastures is certified as humane by four nationwide and global certification agencies, including Animal Welfare Approved and Certified Humane. While such certification reassures White Oak's customers that their dollars do not

port an industrial production model that is unspeakably cruel, humane treatment is truly just a matter of empathy and common sense. As Harris observes, "If you would like to open up a lawn chair and drink a couple of glasses of wine while you watch [your animals], then you have good animal welfare. No normal person enjoys watching a hen in a battery cage or a sow in a farrowing crate, or a steer wading in its own excrement."

For all its livestock, whether ruminant or poultry, humane certification requires first and foremost that the animals not be confined, but be allowed to range over high quality pasture. All the poultry at White Oak—chickens, turkeys, geese, ducks, and guineas—range freely over the same pastures as the cattle and sheep.

Indeed, I do not know of any other pastured poultry operation that is as absolute in its definition of "free range" as White Oak's. Its broilers are not even confined by electronet fencing, but wander over the pastures with no restriction whatever—as Harris puts it, they "could walk to Atlanta, if they wanted to."

White Oak raises 130,000 broilers a year on its own 1,000 acres. Will Harris calls his customized broiler strain "T-Rex Reds," since their robustness and go-get-'em behavior bring to his mind *Tyrannosaurus rex* dinosaurs. They are a fast growing, proprietary hybrid meat strain developed by White Oak in cooperation with its supplier, S & G Poultry



White Oak's pastured poultry mix includes ducks and geese, who enjoy the many ponds on the farm.

of Gainesville, Georgia, from American parent breeds exclusively, as a more robust pastured alternative to the Cornish Cross. The farm raises 2500 chicks per week, in batches of 500 each in large circular brooders. The chicks remain in the brooder two or three weeks and, as soon as they are well feathered, go directly out onto the pastures.

(*Danny Eiland's S & G Poultry was listed as a source of chick stock for pastured broilers in "Sunday Dinner Chicken: Alternatives to the Cornish Cross," first published in the April/May 2009 issue of Backyard Poultry, now available on the Backyard Poultry web-*

site's library: www.backyardpoultrymag.com/library.html. See their ad on page 55. — Ed.)

In contrast to pastured poultry operations in much of the country, the mild climate in southern Georgia enables White Oak Pastures to continue raising pastured broilers twelve months of the year.

White Oak also has a couple of hundred layer hens in the mix, and will soon increase that number to a thousand, in order to provide more eggs to its markets.

Beginning in 2010, White Oak has been raising American Standard Bronze turkeys, a heritage breed known for its rich flavor. In its first year, White Oak marketed 1,000 turkeys, then increased production to 2,000 in 2011. Next year it will probably raise about 5,000.

In 2011 White Oak added ducks, geese, and guineas to its pastured poultry mix. Like the chickens and turkeys, these species are entirely free-ranging, and the waterfowl enjoy the use of the many ponds scattered around the farm's pastures.

All the poultry have as much access to shelter as they desire, in the form of 82 range houses, each 14 x 20 feet and mounted on skids. The shelters are moved by tractor as required to provide fresh grass for the birds and to fertilize targeted sections of pasture. All the droppings of the birds are thus "digested" by the pasture sward and boost its fertility, rather than becoming a source of runoff pollution.

Though White Oak's poultry get a good deal of their nutrition from



White Oak Pastures starts 2,500 chicks per week, year round, for sales in six states in the Southeast.



Movable range houses like these (82 in all) provide shelter on the pastures for all the poultry. The water truck makes provision of water more efficient.

pasture, unlike the ruminants they cannot subsist entirely on what they forage there. The farm supplements their foraged diet with a wild game bird mix, purchased locally—various millets, sorghum, sunflower seeds, and the like in lieu of the typical mix of corn, soy, and small grains—and entirely free of antibiotics and synthetic additives.

Guardian dogs—seven Great Pyrenees—provide full-time protection against predators for all the poultry, and for the sheep and cattle as well.

Like Joel Salatin's layer flocks, which follow his beef cattle in the grazing rotation, the chickens, turkeys, and guineas pick apart the cowpies to break pathogen and parasite cycles, disperse their fertility over the entire sward—and glean high-protein feed in the form of fly larvae as a bonus.

Slaughter

In September, 2011, Harris opened his second processing plant, the only on-farm USDA-inspected poultry abattoir in the Southeast, at a cost of one and a half million dollars and with a capacity of more than 200,000 birds a year.

Typical processing volume in the poultry abattoir is 500 broilers per day (soon to increase to 800 per day). In contrast to an industrial plant that might process up to 500,000 broilers per day on high-speed mechanized lines, production at White Oak features automation of scalding and plucking only. *Evisceration is done entirely by hand*, a point worth emphasizing, since a *Consumer Reports* study found that it is evisceration, handled robotically

in industrial poultry processing, which is the source of most of the contamination of typical supermarket chicken by salmonella and campylobacter. White Oak personnel further guard against bacterial contamination by regular testing of dressed carcasses for pathogens.

White Oak is committed to a zero waste policy with regard to both its beef and its poultry processing plants, and takes care to reclaim the resource potential of all slaughter wastes. Blood and softer tissues go into an anaerobic digester, which converts them to liquid fertilizer. Tissues that are more difficult to break down—tendons and tissues high in fat, for example—are composted in windrows that include as well “gin waste” (cotton mill residues) and pulverized bone from the beef abattoir. Both the solid compost and the liquid fertilizer are applied to the farm's hay fields and to pastures outside the current rotation.

Wash water from both abattoirs passes into White Oak's water treatment plant, where it is prepared for use as irrigation water on the farm's pastures.

Marketing

White Oak sells its free-range pastured broilers in its online store; Whole Foods markets in Georgia, Florida, Alabama, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Tennessee; and restaurants and health food stores via four distributors. At the time of this writing, White Oak was marketing 2,500 broilers a week, though Harris wants to increase production to 4,000 per week. His supplier, S & G Poultry, is ready to supply that number of chicks

at any time, and the poultry abattoir has the capacity for that level of processing. The step up in production will come as soon as the farm increases sales through its distribution network.

The farm has been selling its turkeys through its online store and three farmers markets in Atlanta. Whole Foods markets recently began offering White Oak Pastures turkeys throughout the Southeast.

To this point, White Oak has raised turkeys for the classic “turkey seasons” only—Thanksgiving and Christmas. However, Harris plans to start raising smaller groups of turkeys throughout the year to test the out-of-season market.

A Change in the Status Quo?

Readers of my articles in *Backyard Poultry* who know that I favor home and local small farm production of poultry may be surprised I am so excited about a producer operating at White Oak's scale and marketing to supermarkets in six states. But there are many consumers in those states whose sole source of table poultry is the supermarket, in large part because of the demise of small local poultry abattoirs. It is a welcome development indeed that such customers now have the option of choosing poultry that was raised healthfully and humanely, ranging freely on green pasture rather than crowded with tens of thousands of their fellows in factory conditions over their accumulating wastes.

A fundamental law of the market is *One dollar, one vote*, which is to say that any purchase is first and foremost a vote for *more of the same*. One thing White Oak's customers are voting for is a production model in which manure from market flocks is a resource that builds soil and contributes to agricultural sustainability, not an addition to a deepening stain of environmental pollution. (If you doubt the role of industrial poultry as a major factor in pollution of our streams and estuaries, please see the disturbing two-hour documentary *Poisoned Waters*, available on DVD from Public Broadcasting System.)

Perhaps even more important to consumers who seek out White Oak's poultry is concern for the safety of what they put on their family's table. Perhaps they have read reports from *Consumer Reports*—three to date—of random sampling of supermarket broilers from all over the nation, revealing that they are *routinely* (well over half in all samplings) containi

nated by salmonella or campylobacter, or both. (Even mass market “organic” broilers—so certified because they are fed certified-organic feeds even though they are raised in high-confinement facilities by the tens of thousands rather than on pasture—revealed 57 percent contamination by campylobacter.) Or perhaps they read the study from the Emerging Pathogens Institute (published April, 2011, at the University of Florida) which found that salmonella is responsible for more foodborne illness in the United States than any other pathogen; and that, as a food-pathogen combination, campylobacter in dressed poultry tops the list of food-related illnesses, with 600,000 Americans sickened each year.

In a time when so many American farms are struggling to survive, it is significant that White Oak Pastures is *thriving*—paying its 75 employees well above minimum wage, with generous benefits; installing multi-million-dollar, state-of-the-art facilities; and expanding its markets. Clearly it is possible to make a profit while fulfilling its responsibilities both to the customer, for safe food of high quality, and to the ecology. We can hope

that Big Poultry will be inspired to follow suit. If it does not, it may well be supplanted by other producers entering the market at the supermarket scale who follow the new model at White Oak Pastures.

Harvey Ussery is the author of The Small-Scale Poultry Flock (Chelsea Green, 2011), which offers an integrated poultry husbandry based on imitation of nature for production of safer, more wholesome poultry at any scale.

For more information about, or to order his book, see page 36.—Ed.

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