



21st-Century Cowboy

Will Harris' neoclassical farming methods produce the best beef in Georgia.

By Nancy Davidson

Will Harris has a very short commute to work. Every morning, he wakes up at 5 a.m., steps out the door of his house and is immediately on his farm. He begins each day at sunrise with a big cup of coffee in the pasture with his cows, and finishes at sunset with a big glass of wine. In between, he tends to the farm where his family has raised cattle for five generations. From the time White Oak Pastures—located about three hours from Atlanta in Early County, Ga.—was founded in 1866 until World War II, the animals were raised on a diet of grass. It wasn't until the beef business industrialized in the 1950s that the farm became increasingly scientific; in particular, it began introducing grain to the feed and pesticides to the land.

When Harris graduated from the University of Georgia in 1976 with a degree in animal science, he was compelled by economic pressures to continue the industrialization that his father had set into motion and to implement the techniques he had learned in school. It seemed like the right thing to do at the time: Confinement feeding, or feedlots, decreased the operation's food costs. And besides, there was no demand for artisanal beef. But 12 years ago, becoming disenchanted with the excesses of industrialization, Harris began converting the family farm back to traditional methods of grass feeding and organic farming, allowing the cattle to roam freely and graze in pasture. Now, instead of relying on science, he does what comes naturally, drawing on the insight he gains in the hours between the first sip of coffee and the last drop of wine.

At first, it was difficult to give up the tools of modernity. "They made production easier, cheaper and convenient," Harris says. "It was like the difference between turning up your thermostat versus cutting

wood for fire." But he soon became painfully aware of the downsides of industrial farming. Many local species of flora and fauna had disappeared because of pesticides. These toxic chemicals destroyed the best natural elements of the environment, such as the earthworms that made the soil healthier and the clover that made the grazing tastier. Since making the transition to organic, traditional methods of raising cattle, Harris has become the beef director for the American Grassfed Association and the president of Georgia Organics.

When Harris reached the point where he wanted to be able to guarantee a uniform quality of beef, he decided to build a \$2.2 million processing plant on the farm in order to control everything—from the time a calf is born to the time it's butchered.

Harris' involvement with Whole Foods Market intensified when he applied for a loan from the supermarket giant to help complete the plant. "We could have done it without them," he says, "but it was good to have the endorsement of Whole Foods." The grocer now buys as much of Harris' inventory as it can get and sells it locally.

"Will is an unbelievable steward of his farm," says Ed Cifu, the meat coordinator at Whole Foods Market for the Southeast region. "He treats his animals very well. He does what it takes to take care of his land without chemical pesticides, and he produces the best grass-fed beef I've ever tasted."

Harris has developed a cult following in Atlanta, according to Cifu. When he holds weekend tastings in Atlanta-area Whole Foods locations—at his own expense—the sales quadruple, says Cifu. "He's known as the man in the white hat. He'll stand there and explain the process from beginning to end, because he's done it. Customers like to see a person standing behind their meat."

"As a young man, I played sports, [went] hunting and fishing," Harris says. "But I don't do any of that anymore. I didn't give it up; I just didn't want to do it anymore. I fell in love with my work. Being the herdsman and the steward of the land is my vocation, avocation and passion. I don't know much, but I know the hell out of what I do know."

White Oak Pastures continues to be a family business, with the whole family residing on the farm. Harris' wife, Von, is a special-education teacher, and his oldest daughter, Jessica, 26, is an elementary school teacher. But Jenni, 22, is graduating in May with a degree in business marketing. She does all the promotional work, manages the Web site and online store (whiteoakpastures.com), and helps with in-store demonstrations. Jodi, 19, is a freshman in college. "She's a cowgirl," says her father. "She competes in rodeos." ◀

Benefits of 100-percent Organic Grass-Fed Beef from White Oak Pastures

Certified humane by the Animal Welfare Institute

USDA-inspected plant on premises

Hormone- and pesticide-free

No GMOs (genetically modified organisms)

Leaner meat

Higher levels of heart-healthy omega-3 fatty acids and conjugated linoleic acids, which may help prevent cancer

Bolder, beefier, more traditional flavor