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NOTES FROM A FARM

Tillers of the Land

BY TUCKER BERTA

THE FUTURE OF GEORGIA'S AGRICULTURAL ECONOMY IS growing brighter thanks to historically rooted practices that buck modern efficiencies in favor of a deeper respect for the land, the animals, and the people eating the food. These farmers are feeding the state's soul.

Farmer Will Harris, White Oak Pastures

Will Harris has a deep respect for his cows. And hogs, sheep, goats, rabbits, chicken, turkey, geese, guineas, ducks, and the five acres of land where he's growing certified organic vegetables. "My



WILL HARRIS OF WHITE OAK PASTURES

goal is to create an idyllic life for our animals," the farmer and owner of White Oak Pastures says. "My role is to be the steward of our land and our animals."

That's the core value White Oak was founded upon in 1866 by Will's great-grandfather, but as farming technology evolved, so did White Oak. Idyllic living for animals gave way to more efficient processing, as it did on the majority of American farms. "My father was an industrial commodity cattle producer, and that's the way I was raised. We considered good animal welfare simply not abusing the animals or causing them discomfort. We mainly focused on making

meat production cheaper and more efficient."

Will explains the revelation he had in 1995 that brought White Oak back to its historical roots through analogy: "Are you considered a good parent if you lock your kid in the closet? You leave the light on, you make sure there are some potato chips and water in there. They can't get hurt; they can't get run over by a car or kidnapped... But they're not out living life like a kid." He expounds, "Good animal welfare means creating an environment so an animal can express their instinctive behavior. Cows and sheep were born to roam and graze. Chickens were born to scratch and peck. Hogs were born to root and wallow. In an industrial model, they can't do these things."

The result is a farm full of active, seemingly happy animals thriving in their natural state. A proud Will says, "Our chickens are athletes—an industrial chicken couldn't get on top of my hat if I threw it on the floor, but our chickens can jump up on a tree limb. Our cows would live to be twenty-something years old. Industrial produced beef is unnaturally obese, and it would never exist in nature. Those cows die of the same diseases of obesity and inactivity that affect people." (And if we are what we eat, this is not just about the cows' quality of life.)

A better life for the White Oak animals meant a dip in financial prosperity—the Harrises went from making yearly profits to losing money for several straight years. "I gave up all the tools that science gave us to make meat production cheap: hormones, antibiotics, chemical fertilizers, and pesticides," Will explains. But the right consumers found White Oak and appreciated its commitment to safer, more humane, more ecologically sound practices. The farm began to make a profit again five years ago and continues to thrive.

Farmer Rebecca Williams, Many Fold Farm

Rebecca Williams and her husband, Ross, are well studied and well-practiced in the field



of farming—the high school sweethearts interned on farms through college, studied cheese making in Vermont, and continue to be vigilant students of best agricultural practices.

Their nascent farm, Many Fold, has 200 sheep and 800 chickens and turns out cheeses that have a place on (fine dining monarch) Bacchanalia's coveted cheese cart and eggs that Atlanta folks line up early to acquire at the top city farmer's markets. To the consumer, Many Fold Farm's rise to culinary relevancy has been—by all comparisons—quick and easy. But the couple cares too much about their product, their animals, and the land to rest on "good enough."

Last summer, their sheep had nothing to eat. Drought compounded by depleted soil fertility due to cotton farming decades earlier forced them to take their ewes off grass and feed them hay—a costly and less nutritious substitute for good grass. To restore the fertility, they could have brought in cheap chemical fertilizers, but Rebecca calls that solution a "divestment in place of investment." As she explains, "Most farms don't rotate, so whatever organic matter the stock leaves behind does not have time to set in before the cow, sheep, or goat comes back to take out more. Then the animal is sold off, typically to a feedlot where it is fed more fertility from elsewhere, then sold off again as meat to faraway places. It's as if one deposited money in an investment, but then kept coming back to take more money out before the investment matures." She sums up their philosophy this way: "It is my goal and the goal of our farm to leave the land better than when we got it."

For more, visit us online to read about how farmer Paige Witherington, of Serenbe Farms, is setting the new standard: thelocalpalate.com.



REBECCA AND ROSS WILLIAMS OF MANY FOLD FARM