

American Pastoral Interview



Recently Kitchen got the chance to fire off a few questions to Will Harris of White Oak Pastures, a grassfed cattle ranch in Early County, Georgia that has been in his family for more than 140 years. Harris, one of the local food movement's most eloquent advocates, had sage words about the past and future of farming.

How did you become a grassfed beef rancher?

I was born into it. My father, his father, and his father were cattlemen and raised their herds on the same farm that I do. I have never wanted to do anything else.

Your family has raised cattle on the same land since 1866. What is different about how you farm today from how they farmed?

It is remarkably similar, and getting more similar all the time. Increasingly we look to nature, instead of science, for the answers to our questions. And in return, we are finding that we are able to sell our beef to our friends instead of being a component in an industrialized system.

You adopted conventional farming for a bit in your twenties and convinced your father to transition the ranch away from old-fashioned animal husbandry. What did that decision lead to?

I learned animal husbandry from my father and my grandfather. The University of Georgia taught me animal science. On my watch, I led our farm into the factory farm era by industrializing the way that we produced cattle. I never liked it, but I thought it was the right thing to do. It was only after I made the switch to an industrialized system that I understood the damage I was inflicting on our land, our herd, and the folks that ate our beef. I'm happy to have things back on course.

What is the consumer buying when he or she buys White Oak Pastures beef?

I believe our beef is safer, healthier and better tasting than industrial beef. I'm convinced it's better for our environment and more humane for the animals as well.

How is grassfed beef better for the environment?

Feedlot beef is a petroleum-intensive method of production. It takes about 200 more gallons of crude oil to raise a feedlot steer than a grassfed steer, because the bulk of their diet is corn, one of this country's biggest and most subsidized commodity crops. Cows are ruminants. They're made to eat grass, not corn. The current system is dependent on corn as a source of cheap feed, which requires gargantuan amounts of petroleum-based fertilizers to grow.

The farm bill is up for renewal in 2007. What is at stake for White Oak Pastures and other producers like you?

The present farm bill unfairly favors the industrial production of certain commodity crops by large farming entities. The emphasis needs to shift to become more supportive of practices that are environmentally sustainable and treat our food animals more humanely.

How do you feel about Burger King and Smithfield's recent announcements that they will adopt more humane standards for livestock production?

I think that it's great that Burger King is moving from two percent to five percent of its eggs from hens that are not kept in battery cages and increasing from 10 percent to 20 percent of its pork from pigs that are not confined to gestation crates. But 100 percent would be a lot better. I don't believe there would be any improvement at all if consumers were not becoming more focused on animals being treated humanely. Corporations have no soul. They are driven by financial results. I salute consumers who improve their world by voting with their dollars.

Tell me about your new processing plant. How is it more humane?

Our handling pens for the plant are designed by Dr. Temple Grandin, who is undeniably the world's most

renowned authority on humane processing. The plant will be built on my farm so the cattle won't have to travel 1,200 miles on double-decker trucks to slaughter. Many plants are completely automated and process 6,000 head of cattle a day. Ours will process 20. Yes, the animal's life still ends, but we think processing on the farm allows them a measure of dignity they don't typically get. I could go on and on.

In a classic interview with Wendell Berry in a 1973 issue of Plowboy, Berry said that a lot of the people who were coming back to the country from the city shouldn't come, that people were needed to stay in the cities and make them more livable. Who should choose farming?

At the end of World War II, more than 50 percent of the country was directly involved in the production of food and fiber. Today, because of how industrialized our food system has become, less than one percent of people in the U.S. are farmers. So, we certainly need more farmers. However, I do have to admit that I despise seeing good land taken away from farming, just so people can sprawl onto it in an effort to flee from the city. We have depopulated the country of farmers, but we are populating the countryside with non-farmers who are driving up the price of the land, making it difficult for farmers to afford land to farm.

I read a statistic that said that four companies control 83 percent of beef production. How can a small operation like White Oak Pastures compete, particularly with government regulations that favor large producers?

The short answer is that I'm not sure that I can. I do know that making the attempt is the right thing for me to do. Are there enough consumers who are willing to pay the real cost of production for their food? I am part of the experiment and we will see.

What are your hopes for the future?

I hope to build a business that enables me to get the good beef that I raise to people who appreciate it. I hope that this business will be financially successful enough to allow the next five generations of Harris' to earn a living raising cattle on our farm. I hope that our business can serve in some small way as a model for other farmers who want to grow healthy, delicious, environmentally sustainable, and humane food.

For more information about White Oak Pastures, visit www.whiteoakpastures.com.

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