

An idea to chew on: Grass-fed local beef

Animals have 'higher level of care,' cattleman says

By Meridith Ford Goldman
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Will Harris III speaks into the phone with a long Southern drawl. His voice sounds like what good scotch tastes like.

Harris' family has been in the cattle business for five generations, and he used to be a conventional cattleman — the kind who sold to the industrial commodity production system, where his cows might have been trucked thousands of miles to a slaughterhouse and processed at the rate of 400 head per hour, 16 hours a day.



White Oak Pastures beef is certified organic.

“I don’t want to wax sentimental on you,” he coos, “but domestication of an animal requires responsibility of stewardship.”

In other words, if we domesticate cows to slaughter and eat them, then we should take as good care of them beforehand as possible. And, at least to Harris, conventional industrialized methods don’t hack it. His family’s ranch, White Oak Pastures in Bluffton in southwestern Georgia, is one of the few small processors in the South. He opened in April last year after tiring of raising his cattle only to have them processed somewhere else.

“We spend two years raising a calf,” he explains, “and we wanted a higher level of care and stewardship.”

His farm holds three humane certifications, Humane Farm Animal Care, Animal Welfare Approved and one through Whole Foods that allows him to sell his Angus-based breed of beef at the niche supermarkets under the brand name Harris Family Heritage Beef. The beef also is certified organic, which means he’s gone past the “all-natural” requirement you might see on a label in your supermarket to ensure that his cattle are free of hormones and antibiotics (which his farm uses only if a cow gets sick) and roam freely, eating grass.

Imagine that. I mean, isn’t that what cows are supposed to do? Roam around naturally, chewing cud?

In contrast to a conventional processor's 400 head, he's processing 10 each day, in a plant that employs 17 Georgians.

If you're wondering why all this should matter to you, take note: First, small family farms like Harris' are the grass roots of American lifestyle — they spend time and money making the humane treatment of the animal and the sustainability of their land priorities, along with offering a product that is hormone- and antibiotic-free.

Second, do you really want to continue eating steaks processed from cattle that have been fattened to nearly 300 pounds over what they should healthily weigh at slaughter, from corn and soy feeds?

Sure, I know what the pundits cry — grass-fed beef is more expensive. Yes, it is. On average, it costs about 10 percent more per pound. It's also tougher, they'll tell you. Well, that's debatable. But the truth is, the flavor of grass-fed beef has a clean naturalness to it. It's redder in color, though certainly less marbled. Why? Look at the difference between Michael Phelps and John Goodman. Conventionally raised cows are basically forced to be couch potatoes for the entire length of their lives. The beef that's created will be arguably more tender. But it also contains more saturated fat. That extra fat gives an industrial cattleman around 10 percent more "dressing weight" — the amount of usable carcass generated — than Harris will obtain. And that loss trickles into the cost of his beef.

I grilled a trio of Harris' New York Strip steaks (from Whole Foods) last week. The meat was pinker and leaner than the conventionally raised beef I've bought. I grilled the steaks, seasoned with butter and salt, to a pink, warm-centered medium rare — the perfect temperature for grass-fed beef. They were delicious: tender (though not as tender as conventionally processed meat, I admit) and the flavor is every bit as good, if not better.

And my conscience rested easily. The cost — \$16.99 per pound — was worth it to me.

"Industrial farming since World War II has allowed practices such as overfeeding with grains and confinement of the animal to take place, as well as the addition of [genetically modified organisms] and hormones. These things were developed to help take costs away from the industrial farmer," Harris says.

"At some point, you've got to decide what the total impact of what you buy is."

For more information: 229-641-2081, www.whiteoakpastures.com.

Sea Salt Rub for Beef

Makes about 6 tablespoons

Hands on: 5 minutes

Total time: 5 minutes

Grass-fed beef has a clean natural flavor, and this rub adds a bit of tenderness. Rub it generously on your steaks before grilling, and brush it on steaks while they are on the grill. This makes enough for 4 strip steaks.

1/2 teaspoon cumin seeds
1/2 teaspoon coriander seeds
1/2 teaspoon minced rosemary
1 teaspoon black pepper
1 teaspoon sea salt
4 tablespoon unsalted butter, melted

In a small bowl, mix cumin, coriander, rosemary, pepper, salt and butter until fully combined.

Per tablespoon: 70 calories (percent of calories from fat, 97), trace protein, trace carbohydrates, trace fiber, 8 grams fat (8 grams saturated), 21 milligrams cholesterol, 315 milligrams sodium.