

Atlanta Cuisine - Feature Article

September 2006

Smack in the middle of South Georgia's cotton and peanut country and significantly below the "gnat line," full-time cattleman Will Harris blends a fierce love of his land with sound scientific practices and a gentle spirit to create a completely grass-fed cattle ranch called White Oak Pastures. Harris' 1000-acre farm, located near the small town of Bluffton, Ga., has been in his family for 140 years. His great grandfather, James Edward Harris, was a senior at Mercer University when the "War of Northern Aggression" began. The entire senior class left school to form a cavalry, so, at 19, James Harris found himself a captain in the CSA. As the war progressed, money for provisions became scarce, and officers often provided supplies for their men by spending their own money. By the end of the war, James Harris was broke and lost the family farm in Sumter County. Harris' uncle, LaFleur Harris, helped him start over on the land that Will Harris cares so deeply for today. From 1866 until after World War II, the Harris family raised and butchered cattle without supplemental hormones or antibiotics. Early in the 20th century, they butchered a cow and several hogs every morning. The meat was then transported by mule-drawn wagon several miles to Bluffton, where it was sold to general stores, a boarding house and a hotel. A commissary was later built on the Harris property for additional distribution.

After World War II, however, the United States was producing copious quantities of petroleum, some of which was turned into cheap nitrogen fertilizer. Returning GIs needed work and found it in Midwestern feed lots and slaughter houses. Hybridized corn allowed yields to go way up. Says Will Harris, "Obscene amounts of corn were produced, so livestock farmers realized it was cheaper to haul the cattle to the corn than the corn to the cattle."

Harris' father, Will Harris Jr., raised cattle using the industrial farm model for a number of years. Will Harris believes feedlot-raised, grain-fed beef is wrong. "It's bad for the animals, bad for the environment and bad for people," argues Harris. He continues, "I sold cows that way for a while, and I didn't like it at all."

Feedlot cattle live a short and miserable life. They are confined in small stand-up pens and fed grains mixed with animal byproducts, including the central nervous systems of other cows, to make them grow heavier faster.

In addition, crowded, unnatural conditions necessitate the use of antibiotics to combat illnesses borne of the stresses of a feedlot existence. Unsanitary conditions may contribute to E-coli, and the byproducts ingested by the cattle may cause mad cow disease. "Why do we do that?" asks Harris. "See that animal over there? She has a digestive system designed to digest cellulose — grass! Cows don't scavenge other cows in nature. They won't even forage near other cow plops," Harris points out.

Harris knows he's fighting an uphill battle raising his herd in a natural and humane manner. "Consumers have thought of grain-fed beef as the gold standard," he says in his charming Southern drawl. "Grain-fed beef is more tender and more fatty, because artificial hormone implants will create a 1,250-lb. animal at 16 months old." Harris must also convince consumers that his grass-fed ground beef is worth the difference in price compared to conventionally raised beef. Publix sells White Oak Pastures for \$6.99 a pound right next to industrially produced ground beef products at \$2.99 a pound. "If that shit is worth \$2.99, then I should be charging \$9.99!" Harris says with a laugh.

But, he contends, industrially produced beef is not healthier — and he has the statistics to prove it. White Oak Pastures beef is higher in good omega-3s and conjugated linoleic acid. It's also lower in saturated fats. And many high-end chefs and knowledgeable consumers think it tastes better, too.

In addition to Publix, White Oak Pastures beef is currently available in Tree of Life health food stores, and recently, Harris inked a deal to make White Oak Pastures ground beef available in several Atlanta restaurants, including Five Seasons Brewing, Woodfire Grill and Aria.

So what's next for the high-spirited, 51-year-old Harris? Not content to simply produce and sell his beef products, Harris dreams of building a processing facility on his land, which he plans to call Harvest House. Instead of trucking his cattle to Tifton, Ga., for processing, they could be harvested right on his beloved land. "My cattle will never be loaded into a truck in their whole life," Harris declares. "I know how to raise cattle the natural way. I am irrationally exuberant that if I produce it, sophisticated consumers will buy it," he continues. He awaits a decision from Publix to distribute his beef in their Florida warehouses, which would go a long way toward making Harvest House a reality. Harvest House will also eventually allow Harris to sell his beef directly to the public from a small retail operation, and provide him with a facility for dry-aging beef so that he can begin offering muscle cuts (read: steaks!). As always, this man lives with his heart firmly rooted in his family's past, his mind firmly planted in the present and his eyes looking toward the future, and hopes to include his daughters in the continued success of White Oak Pastures.

If these lofty goals weren't enough, Harris wants to share his vision with other family farmers everywhere. "In the past, the slogan I heard was, 'American farmers feed the world,'" Harris remarks. "Is that the way it ought to be?" he questions. "Why should we prevent the world from developing agriculture?" Unfortunately for Harris, accomplishing these goals tears him away from the land he loves so much. "I love to get up early and enjoy a big cup of coffee in the field before sun-up," he says. "And then I drink a big glass of wine in the field and watch the sun go down. It doesn't matter what I have to do between those two things," Harris says. "But I really don't like to miss that."

It may seem counter-intuitive to some that such a spiritual man could be in a business in which animals eventually lose their lives. "I love my herd the way you love your dog," Harris says huskily. "If something happened to my herd, I would have to get therapy!" Harris' farm is certified humane, which means the animals are treated with respect and are killed humanely. And, although his cattle bear the misfortune of being destined to be food, they live unfettered lives of sunshine, pure sweet grass, clean water and only enough confinement to keep them safe from predators. Sounds like they're winners of the cow lottery!

Back in Harris' old white farmhouse, which functions as his office, an Australian cattle-dog named Jack lays sleeping upside-down on the cool brick floor with his feet in the air. Harris' middle daughter Jenny pops in to share an updated spreadsheet; she's just finished counting heifers and steers for her dad and one of his associates. Harris calmly and quietly reviews her work while Jack stretches and dreams a cattle-dog dream. "Dad, please call this man back," Jenny says, "before he has a cow!"

mgess@atlantacuisine.com