

Cattle Call - Will Harris of local White Oak Pastures raises beef naturally and humanely

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The cattle raised by Will Harris roam land that's belonged in the Harris family for five generations. The grass-fed Harris Family Heritage Beef is sold at Whole Foods Market and is on the menu at several Atlanta area restaurants. The Harris farm has come full circle in its production, transitioning to and then away from industrialization. The Sunday Paper talked with Harris to learn more.

Q What's the history of White Oak Pastures?

A My great-grandfather came to this farm in 1866 after the Civil War (or what he called the Northern Invasion). He'd had a farm prior to the war and lost it. He was an officer, a Calvary Captain, and officers who could afford to provide for their own outfits did so with the idea that when they won the war they would be repaid—but it didn't work out quite like the brochure had promised. He had an uncle who was a medical doctor who started him here on this land, and we've been here ever since. My daughters are the fifth generation raising cattle on this land.

This is cotton and peanut country, but he was a cattleman. When his son (my grandfather) took over, he expanded it, and they slaughtered one cow and two or three hogs every day—that was before refrigeration. That meat was loaded onto a mule-drawn wagon and hauled up the road to Bluffton, where he had a little route in town to deliver beef to the general stores, hotels and boarding houses. During my father's watch, which was in the post-World War II era, that whole system went away. It was the beginning of the industrialization of the beef business. During the first part of his watch, we raised calves and loaded them onto double-decker semis and shipped them to Nebraska, Iowa or Kansas to be corn-fed.

I went to the University of Georgia and studied the science of hormone implants, confinement feeding, antibiotics and all the other industrial tools to help make cows gain weight quicker and help them survive in confinement on a high-carbohydrate diet. As a young man I really enjoyed that and got good at it, but, as I grew into middle age, certain aspects of it I enjoyed less and less. I came to dislike the industrialization of it, of loading cows onto a truck for a 30-hour drive with no rest, no food or water, where the cows on the top level would defecate and urinate on the cows on the bottom. I started reading about sophisticated consumers who want to eat beef that's raised differently. I knew that I could raise it that way and, in 1995, started transitioning the herd and ultimately obtained a production system that's better for the environment, our cattle and the health of the people who eat our beef.

What was involved in transitioning the herd?

Since the end of World War II, science had developed a lot of tools that allow farmers to produce beef quickly and cheaply. We gave these up. We don't use artificial hormones or antibiotics. We don't confine animals into a feedlot. We don't feed them high-carbohydrate corn diet or other unnatural feeds. They eat grass and hay because that's the way nature intended. In our program, we emulate the natural production system before man industrialized it. It's a holistic program. We are grass farmers and herdsman. We have 1,000 acres of land, and I lease about that much more for our 650 cows.

We built a USDA-approved processing plant on my farm, and I believe it's the only farmer-owned on-farm USDA-approved processing plant in the United States.

How have consumers responded?

It's been real good. There's a growing demand for beef that's raised naturally among sophisticated consumers who care about environmental sustainability, humane treatment of animals, the integrity of a local food production system and who care about carbon footprint, food miles and other green initiatives.

We are in a unique position—by virtue of the fact that we own our own processing facility and it sits here on the farm where the cattle are raised—to educate people. We're very proud of the way we raise our cattle and produce our beef. We invite people to come here and let us show them what we do. Recently, the Georgia Restaurant Association organized a tour for chefs. Just call us, and make an appointment and come. **SP**