

Anne Freeze: Food from the heart

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This past weekend was another whirlwind back in Athens, Ga. Terry and I attended the Potlikker Film Festival sponsored by Southern Foodways Alliance. These showings of short films are held at various times in various towns to showcase the documentaries made in conjunction with SFA and to introduce the SFA to new people.

The films are around 10 minutes in length and showcase a Southern artisan or farmer. You can see two of the four that were shown last weekend, as well as others, on the SFA Web site (www.southernfoodways.com).

But there is one, entitled “CUD” (remember the film “Hud”?), that I’d like to tell you a little about. Now, I am asked by the powers that be at The Dispatch to try and write about local food and food people. And, I do try to do that. However, I tend to think that food crosses boundaries and geographical lines; it is what brings us all to a common table. Knowing what is out there, just who is giving their heart and soul to bring us the best for our table to feed friends and family is important, no matter where they happen to have their land.

And so I take the pleasure of introducing you to Will Harris, of White Oak Pastures in Bluffton, Ga. The film on Will was four-star, standing-ovation event.

Will raises grass-fed beef on his farm, started in 1866 by his great-grandfather. The cows he has now are descended from the cows that grazed in the same pastures. Will graduated from the University of Georgia with a degree in animal science and headed home to farm in the industrial way.

A better way

He says he was “addicted to ammonium nitrate” to keep his fields lush. He decided at a point in his life that he had a responsibility to the earth, his family and his customers — to leave chemicals behind. He says in the film it was as if he was coming off of a cocaine binge: “I’d wake up some mornings and might want to kill a man for a little ammonium nitrate.”

It was not easy to change, and it wasn’t cheap. Will has stayed true to his beliefs. I encourage you to visit his Web site at www.whiteoakpastures.com and read his mission statement. It makes me swell with pride, and I don’t even know him. I like how he begins and ends his days though. He starts each morning with a large mug of coffee in the middle of his beloved pasture and watches the sun rise. He ends every day in the same place, watching the sunset with a 750-milliliter “glass” of wine.

Now, I am not being smug about the importance of people like Will Harris in the food chain. I realize that his beef is more expensive. What I would like for myself is to come to the point that I treasure the taste and experience of eating such a product enough that I’ll pay more for it. We certainly don’t need to eat it every day. But, it’s obvious I’ve got a ways to go because I stopped at Costco on the way home from Athens and bought ribeyes at \$6.99 per pound. I hang my head in a moment of shame right now.

Why do I think it’s important to know about Will Harris? For one, I believe he is to be respected for his integrity. I also respect his intentions to look after my health and my world with his environmental vision. In the words of the SFA, Will is a “keeper of the flame” or a “guardian of the tradition.”

Do it right

I had another a-ha moment while in Athens. My friend, Lili, took Terry and me to The White Tiger for lunch. This is a small restaurant in the historic Boulevard District, housed in a 100-plus-year-old former neighborhood grocery store. The owners, Amanda Crouse and Ken Manning, serve exquisitely made casual food in this funky, friendly

place. Nothing fancy, no waiters, no tablecloths, just food made with love and a passion for quality — and lots of smiles from everyone.

I've always said I don't really care what you serve in your food establishment: I like a good hot dog as well as lobster (we did eat at The Varsity as well). What I do strongly care about is that whatever it is, it is made with love and attention.

What made this place so special? Well, when we walked in, we were greeted with a smile and a welcome. The process is simple — go to the counter, take a look at the menu, ask about specials and order. They'll take the time to chat with you and tell you about what they have.

I had the best hamburger I've ever had, I swear. Why was it special? It was seasoned! It had been seasoned with salt and pepper before grilling on a real grill. It was charred, with crispy little bits around the edges, served on a soft bun made by a local bakery, with arugula and thick-cut smoked bacon on top.

Terry had a brisket sandwich, also crispy edges, lightly smoky from that morning's time on a grill. Lili had the barbecue, served on a salad. All came to the table in paper boats with a piece of waxed paper. Nothing fancy: All attention was on the food.

For dessert, we split a piece of homemade chocolate.

As I left, I thought about the meal. That little place was the center of the food universe for me. Ken and Amanda make you feel as if the reason they get up in the morning is to cook for you alone. And I really, really appreciate that.

It's not hard, but it takes attention, care, some time — and most especially, it takes heart.