

Georgia Trend - Food, Glorious Food

Krista Reese published May 2008

The state's organic food movement is broad enough to include south Georgia cattlemen, small farmers and a mainstream crowd of savvy chefs, concerned parents and shoppers in search of better-tasting tomatoes. Demand for locally-grown food is high

Will Harris is a proud fifth-generation cattleman standing astride three centuries. His great-grandfather bought White Oak Pastures farm in Early County, near Bluffton, in 1866, after what he called the "Northern invasion."

Some of Harris' cows are descendants of his grandfather's original Cracker herd. The White Oak Pastures website (www.whiteoakpastures.com) features photos of his father, grandfather and great-grandfather, as well as his wife and three daughters, and videos of his spread's lush greenery and his 600-head of mostly Black Angus-based beef cattle.

Born in 1954, Harris is the fulcrum on which this farm has turned full circle. His grandfather and great-grandfather slaughtered cows six days a week, and took meat by mule-drawn wagon to town each morning. The cows lived their entire lives on White Oak.

But when Will was growing up, his father introduced the methods that most post-World War II farmers had begun employing: high-yield, efficient "economies of scale" practices that called for confining and feeding the livestock grain, rather than grass, and shipping them more than a thousand miles for slaughter.

Harris earned his agriculture degree at the University of Georgia, and when he took over the farm, he carried on his father's modern methods and added more he'd learned in college. Like most of his neighboring farmers and fellow cattlemen, he amped up the scientifically proven techniques for greater production and profit that called for antibiotics in the cattle's grain, and treating them with hormones to stimulate growth.

"I didn't really have an epiphany," he says in a south Georgia drawl. But he admits he was bothered by sending his cattle off on double-decker trucks for slaughter, "where they would be urinating and defecating all over each other, for a thousand miles without any rest, food or water."

So about 10 years ago, when Harris started to read about an increased consumer demand for humanely-raised beef, fed on grass, he began investigating the possibilities. He ordered a feasibility study from the University of Georgia's Center for Agribusiness and Economic Development.

Today, White Oak Pastures is nearing the completion of its three-year program to become a certified organic beef producer, which means the cows don't receive hormones, and the grass they eat isn't supplemented by antibiotic grains, or controlled with pesticides or non-natural fertilizers. Just as in his great-grandfather's day, his cattle live their entire lives wandering freely on pasture that isn't treated by chemicals, and they bear young according to the seasons, rather than a schedule.

Harris also is preparing to open his own small meat processing plant, at a cost of \$1.2 million – one of the first new plants of its kind east of the Mississippi. Then he will be able to supplement the small system he's been using to supply area stores, as well as Publix – and begin selling meat from his website.

Harris has had to "unlearn" most of what he was taught at UGA about agriculture. "I can't tell you how many times a day I ask myself, 'Now, how did we used to do that?'" he says.

By any measure, Georgia's organic food industry is in its infancy. Last year's total acreage devoted to organic crops was a mere 1,600. (California, which leads the nation in organic cropland acres, claims more than 220,000.) However, Georgia's figures represent a 33 percent increase over the previous year's 1,200 acres.

Those numbers do not reflect the larger numbers of uncertified farmers who are devoting small parts of their fields to a more natural, less chemically dependent cultivation style to meet a growing consumer demand. (Georgia is one of a minority of states requiring a registration process for organic farmers.)

The reasons for the increase are plentiful and obvious, ranging from consumer concerns for animals and the environment, to a demand for better-tasting food, and in the wake of frightening videos of "downer cows" and reports on lax standards on internationally sourced fish and seafood, public health and safety.

Still, despite its agricultural prominence nationally, Georgia's organic production lags far behind other states, perhaps because the clichés associated with it have been slow to fade in this politically and culturally conservative state.

Mainstream Appeal

Native son Will Harris is about as far from the long-haired, Earth-shoed organic farmer stereotype as the organic buyers are from their own stereotype: Contrary to popular belief, they're not really white, wealthy Volvo-driving NPR listeners – studies show that more than half come from households earning less than \$50,000 annually, and per capita, Asians, Hispanics and African Americans buy more organic products than Caucasians.

What once was viewed as the pet cause of a fringe element is today more likely the everyday shopping choice of a mainstream crowd of concerned parents, impassioned foodies and boosters of the local economy with a long view of the future. The result: brisk business for such specialty markets as Whole Foods and Atlanta's Sevananda, plus ever-increasing shelf space in big-name grocery stores including Publix and Kroger, and a multitude of farmers' markets and "farm-to-fork" providers for restaurants and individuals.

The Georgia Organics Local Food Guide lists 47 farmers markets, not counting groceries, community gardens or "community-supported agriculture" (CSAs), in which customers enroll in advance to buy a farm's seasonal wares. At places such as Atlanta's weekly Morningside Market, consumers join chefs to buy and learn such lessons as: Locally grown vegetables will often keep longer, because they haven't spent the last week on a truck, and "year-round tomatoes" means the pink cardboard numbers at Sav-A-Lot.

Despite the relative speed of growth in organic and sustainable farming, many cultural, financial and managerial obstacles remain for farmers who'd like to change methods. "Anyone who says that switching [from traditional high-yield farming to organic] will be easy is 'greenwashing,'" says Julia Gaskin, a professor specializing in sustainable agriculture at UGA's ag school.

Farmers may find themselves working harder – at least for the first few years – for a smaller initial return. Still, Gaskin stresses that despite the risks, there also are rewards for traditional small family farms that have struggled to compete – or even hang onto their land – in recent decades. "I had some dark moments," after changing methods, Harris says. "We've always lived well. But there were some days ... Well, let's just say I didn't have to pay a lot of taxes."

As farmers and consumers grapple with this new marketplace, traditional agencies and entities – such as the state Department of Agriculture, county extension agents, the Farm Bureau and UGA's agriculture school – are beginning to figure out how to help farmers make choices. These ships of state, often with strong ties to big agribusiness, can be slow and difficult to turn, but they're finding partners in organizations such as Georgia Organics, a nonprofit group that promotes organic and sustainable agriculture. (Its website,

www.georgiaorganics.org, includes detailed lists of resources around the state, including a wealth of information for farmers, gardeners and eaters.)

Founded in 1997, the group is a loose coalition of parties interested in better, healthier food and sustainable agriculture – farmers, consumers, restaurant owners and chefs, greenspace advocates. “We’re where all the dots get connected,” says the group’s board president, Barbara Petit. “We’d like to see a shift from commodity-based agriculture to community-based agriculture – away from the old ‘Get Big or Get Out’ system.”

Georgia Organics has seen an “explosion” of interest, says Executive Director Alice Rolls, with attendance of the group’s annual conference jumping from around 150 in 2004, to this year’s 600.

“Everybody used to think of organic farmers as crazy hippy-dippy types,” Petit says. “This year, it’s: This is the way of the future.”

Women seem to be the group’s driving force, from Les Dames d’Escoffier, an alliance of female food professionals who have partnered with Georgia Organics, to concerned moms, perhaps for obvious reasons: Women are more often the family’s cooks and shoppers, with an interest that begins with something as universal and elementary as mother’s milk.

“Dairy is a big entry point for mothers,” Petit says.

From the agriculture department to the farm front, from Georgia Organics to hard-nosed agribusiness analysts, almost everyone agrees on the problems: Consumer demand for locally grown and organic products is high, but supply is still often scarce. Or when there is supply, distribution is faulty or missing – critically important when you’re dealing with restaurants and food suppliers.

Ironically, standard food distribution methods – like those Harris once used to ship his cattle – often make it much easier to get food from out-of-state (or international) competitors. Astonishingly, most of Americans’ food travels an average 1,500 miles to reach its destination, relying on plenty of fossil fuels to get it there.

Critics say conventionally farmed foods are cheaper (sometimes as much as 50 percent less) than organics because the “true” costs are paid for later – in terms of oil dependence, ozone depletion, erosion of the domestic economy and even poorer health: The use of pesticides and antibiotics in grain-fed beef have been linked to children’s asthma, antibiotic-resistant bacteria and even “superbug” strains of E. coli; grass-fed beef is lower in fats and higher in Omega-3 fatty acids, important factors in fighting heart disease.

Deputy Agriculture Commissioner (and former House Speaker) Terry Coleman takes a wider view, seeing his role as a promoter of Georgia products as well as the newly developing “agritourism” industry. “We’ve had a lot of success with the Georgia Wine High-way,” he says. “We hope to duplicate it with a Dairy Trail,” which would link seven small-herd dairy farms processing their own cheese and butter. In addition, he says the state is working with Dole to help produce and promote another signature Georgia crop – muscadines.

No one is promoting a wholesale, immediate switch to organic farming – in fact, says Tattall County extension agent Reid Torrance, conventional farming “feeds a lot of people There’s no way we could produce what we need organically.”

While Torrance has helped Vidalia onion farmers meet a growing consumer demand for organic products, he sees limitations for other crops – including the state’s symbol, the peach. Its temperamental nature and susceptibility to insects and disease makes organic growth more difficult, he says.

But Torrance also believes that promoting the “locally grown” angle is a practical, workable step in the right direction, especially if you begin by focusing on “Southeastern” as “local.”

“I think the ‘locally grown’ concept is great for America,” he says. “I believe it’s an issue of national security Wouldn’t it be great if school systems were provided incentives to work with local providers to provide locally grown foods?”

The Learning Curve

In fact, institutions may represent the next big step for the locally grown/organic movement. At Emory University, a program to bring more local foods into the cafeteria is just one small part of the college’s attempt to provide healthier foods and to reduce the institution’s carbon footprint.

Anthropology professor Peggy Barlett, who is co-chairing the effort, says Emory also is beginning with small steps toward its ultimate goal of providing all local, organic foods, and has met the challenge of finding organic supplies head-on: by hiring a farmer who will help round them up.

In addition, Barlett says even their large corporate supplier has been cooperative in making changes to supply what they need. “There’s a real learning curve for everyone,” she says. “Plus they are happy to meet a need in the marketplace.”

It seems everywhere, small organic and/or sustainable gardens are, so to speak, cropping up. Emory’s program includes three small plots that will help educate young people who have perhaps never seen broccoli in the field. (And because of the university’s reintroduction of such old-fangled devices as rainbarrels and cisterns, the gardens have been little affected by the drought, Barlett says.)

In Atlanta, one high-profile chef, Linton Hopkins of the award-winning Restaurant Eugene, engineered a program at his children’s elementary school, E. Rivers, designed to teach kids about growing, eating and enjoying vegetables. Starting with three small raised beds, the kids planted seeds and watched them grow. Then Hopkins returned to show them how their crops could be eaten.

“My son got in the first tomato,” he says with pride. “It was great to watch them picking the little radishes and taking them back to class.”

The school’s salad bar now features some of the students’ produce. The program has been such a success that each class now has its own garden, and the program shows every sign of continuing long after Hopkins’ children leave the school. “It wasn’t forced on anyone,” Hopkins says. “But now it’s just part of the system.” The school is exploring a partnership with Cascade Elementary, to expand its gardening efforts.

Skip Glover is helping other segments of the population feed and educate themselves through small, sustainable gardens – seniors and immigrants. He remembers his own father turning from pesticides in the ’60s after reading Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*.

One of the first Georgia farmers to earn his certified organic label, Glover later decided to forgo it, instead relying on a close circle of clients who know and trust his products as naturally and sustainably grown. As he’s gotten older, he’s opened his farm outside of Douglasville to those who might otherwise never have a chance to grow their own food, in a kind of informal share-cropping arrangement. “I have never seen these levels of interest, especially among seniors,” he says, who relish having a small plot of earth to grow things – and enjoy the low-cost, healthy food.

The success of this new movement still seems to depend on an as-yet uncreated system of transporting food from farms to buyers. But every challenge also represents an opportunity. On Tybee Island, on New Year’s Eve, 29-year-

old chef Robert Wood was celebrating the last day at Georges' restaurant, the local fine dining establishment where he'd worked for the last eight years.

But noting the gap between providers such as Savannah's Shirley Daughtry, the former elementary school principal who was an organic farming pioneer, and Savannah's restaurants, such as Elizabeth's on 37th, one of the first Southern restaurants to celebrate local, seasonal ingredients, Wood and his partner, fellow former chef Patrick Zimmerman, stepped in.

They formed a company called Green Tomato Concepts and now make regular trips from their warehouse in Pooler, where farmers take their wares, to restaurants and stores in Savannah. In March, they planned to begin delivering boxes of organic produce to individuals as well. "The growth potential literally is huge," he says.

For Will Harris and others who would follow his lead, the answers to marketplace problems lie not in state or federal agencies, but in entrepreneurs like Wood and farmers like himself – as well as the consumers who will be the final arbiters of this movement's success or failure.

"Consumers have got to vote with their dollars," Harris says, "on what they want the world to be."

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