

Grass Finished Beef

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Raising grass-fed beef, says Will Harris, is not a get-rich-quick proposition. But he quickly adds, "No surprise there-the cattle business is not a get-rich-quick proposition." Harris has seen the cattle business both from the conventional side and from the birth-to-table, pasture-raised end. His farm, White Oak Pastures, has been in the family for 143 years; he says that helped him when he made the decision in the mid-90s to transition into grass finishing. "I have the advantage of raising cattle on the same farm that I was raised on," he says, "and that my father and his father were raised on, so the old ways had not left us completely...we did some things, and knew some things, that relied heavily on that historical data."

But before then, Harris says his family's farm raised cattle as conventionally as anyone else. Modern production methods, which include growth promotants, antibiotics, and finishing cattle on grain, developed in earnest after World War II and now dominate the industry, and Harris doesn't have illusions that will fade away. "I think that grass-fed is a niche market," he says. "I don't expect there to be a huge percentage of the commodity beef business to move to grass-fed; it's just not going to work that way. There is a clientele, a sophisticated consumer, that will choose to have beef that's produced this way, but I don't expect it to ever be, really, a significant percentage of the beef produced in this country."

Harris tries to satisfy that clientele with beef produced under his own brand, which was approved by USDA in 2000; before then, he'd sold some of his organically raised beef locally, using a local processor.

Among his customers are the Publix and Whole Foods Markets chains, the Buckhead Beef subsidiary of food distribution giant Sysco, and other specialty distributors. His farm, he says, is the largest certified organic farm in Georgia, although he's not yet marketing the beef as organic, pending his ability to secure organically produced hay. He markets about 600 head a year, mostly using Angus genetics.

They take 22-24 months to finish; if they were to be graded, which they are not, Harris says there would be "some low choice-select muscle". Without divulging the premium they bring, he points out the many higher costs involved in finishing cattle on grass; one of those is the large amount of land it takes compared to a feedlot, although he notes, "In my country, we get 54" of rain a year, and you can certainly have a lot more stocking density than you can in most parts of the country." Similarly, the labor costs are higher; it takes more cowboys to wrangle cattle on pasture than the same number of cattle in a feedlot.



Harris is also chairman of the beef division, of the American Grassfed Association, a Colorado based trade association with nearly 300 members; formed in 2003, AGA promotes the industry through government relations, research, concept marketing and public education. Harris says the organization also provides a network through which members can share production and marketing tips. Producers can also get help in their operations through some of the emerging

university programs for grass finished beef; Auburn and the University of Georgia are doing research, as has Colorado State. But, says Harris, "I've had to figure it out for myself for the most part."

One of the changes he had to make was in his herd's genetics; the cattle industry has moved toward what he calls a "feedlot" animal—"large-framed, hard-keeping kind of animals." Harris maintains a closed herd on the female side, so he's focused on breeding down the heifer he retains in terms of frame score and other growth characteristics. He's also had to, as he says, "again become a grass farmer, a forage producer—I still knew a little bit about that, but certainly not as much as I had known—become a stockman again." And asked whether he's glad he made the transition, he answers frankly, "Life was certainly a lot easier when I raised cattle and sold them off, and to be honest life is probably generally more profitable; it depends on where in the cycle you are...we gave up the tools to take cost out of it, so we added cost back to our production model, and there've been times we've struggled to move the beef into the premium market that you need to move it to make all that work." Dr. Allen Williams' background bears some similarities to Harris'. He, too, was raised on a farm that had been in the family since the 1830's; then, his life took an academic turn, and he taught Animal Science at a couple of universities, including Mississippi State.

Then, he got into the consulting business, and found himself talking to producers who were delving into organic and naturally raised beef. "It just started making a lot of sense to me, quite frankly," he says, "because I started remembering the way that we did things on my family's farm as I was growing up, and I remember how we changed"—meaning the same conventional tools, like pharmaceuticals, that were adopted by the Harris farm. Over time, says Williams, his attitude evolved, and "I began to see the benefits, both financially and economically to the farms and ranchers, and the benefits in terms how this impacted the animals, the environment, and the health prospects and health profile of the foods that we eat."

And the result was Tallgrass Beef, a Sedan, Kan. based marketer of grass-finished beef. Williams is Chief Operating Officer; the CEO is Bill Kurtis, the high profile television program host and reporter. Williams says they raise and process some of their own cattle, and also contract with farmers and ranchers across the country—provided they're "willing to use the genetics that we recommend, the specific cattle bloodlines that we like and we know work, and that are willing to follow our protocols."

Williams says producers who follow the protocol reap the advantage of their genetic selection; their breeding cattle, he says, "tend to be highly efficient, highly fertile females that have great longevity."

In looking at the input costs for these females and the amount of time in terms of longevity that they are in production on a farm or ranch, we have very definite economic advantages there." He says he is running something similar to a university integrated resources management program for Tallgrass producers, and says their enhanced grazing methods also reduce reliance on stored forages, chemical fertilizers, and machinery needs. And the bottom line: as of late February, according to Williams, his producers were receiving \$1.80-\$1.85/cwt on a carcass basis, some \$0.50 over the commodity beef market. Although the cattle take "2-3 months longer to get there," Williams says they finish at the same weight as grain-finished cattle, 1150-1350 lbs, and his cost of gain is the same or a little lower, \$0.80-0.85 cents/lb.

He also brags about the taste of Tallgrass beef, and says the flavor profile is more robust than that of most grain-fed beef, "what most of our chefs are describing as a 'beefier' flavor to it." He dips into science to claim the flavor of conventionally fed beef, by comparison, is deteriorating; with the explosion of the ethanol industry, many feedlots are now giving cattle as much as 50-60% dried distillers grain, the high-protein, high-fat ethanol byproduct. But DDGs, Williams says, "are very much lacking in bioflavonoids, and so in the grain-fed sector we're seeing a much blander beef in terms of flavor being put out now." Bioflavonoids, usually just called flavonoids, are produced by plants and are believed to convey health benefits against disease and other toxins that attack the body.

But Williams says his cattle are getting more of them, and they add to the flavor advantage of his product. "We know that our customers like it," he says, "our chefs like it. We're in an awful lot of restaurants, and the response

is extremely favorable to the product; typically the response is that our beef actually has a flavor to it-they love the flavor, they love the robustness of it. And the general comparison that we get is, 'This tastes like beef that I remember from my childhood'."