

The green grass of Georgia

By Suzanne B. Bopp (Monday, October 10, 2005)

<http://www.drovers.com>

Will Harris has marketed his calves one at a time in a stockyard, in a pool with other producers, and after retaining ownership in the feedyard. "I don't think there's any way you can sell a cow that I haven't sold a cow," Mr. Harris says. But until last January, he had never tried selling beef.

That was the month when Mr. Harris' grass-fed beef debuted in retail stores, following years of behind-the-scenes preparation. The effort was in part a response to Mr. Harris' growing awareness of what he hopes is an expanding segment in the consumer market. "This is another segment of the market that has made a studied decision about what they want to eat," he says. "It will probably always be a niche market."

Mr. Harris hastens to add, "I have nothing negative to say about grain-fed beef," and he has produced plenty of it. He majored in animal science at the University of Georgia and learned about, and subsequently used, hormone implants, antibiotics, "everything that was legal," then sent his calves to feedyards to finish on grain. He won't hesitate to return to that kind of production if this endeavor doesn't work out the way he hopes.



REAL-LIFE MANAGEMENT

WHITE OAK PASTURES

Owner:
Will Harris III
Location:
Bluffton, Ga.
Operation:
650-head cow/calf

Tree of Life sells it through natural stores from Miami to Washington, D.C. It's also offered at 15 Publix grocery stores in Georgia. Mr. Harris will do product demonstrations himself, though he says he is "just a cattleman and not really a marketer." He also takes his beef for demos everywhere he can think of, from food shows to football games. These contacts with consumers help bring their attention to his product.

In addition, he learns from them what they want. "My first brochure talked about higher omega 3s and conjugated linoleic acid in my beef," he says. "When I'd go to Atlanta and talk to sophisticated folks, I'd see their eyes glaze over. Then it would come up that we've been here since 1866; we've got the fifth generation on the farm." Those kinds of stories really got their attention, and he's since changed his brochure. And although he has a Web site at www.whiteoakpastures.com, he doesn't want to sell beef through it; he prefers to use conventional distribution through stores.

The University of Georgia does profiles of those fatty acids on every lot of his grass-fed beef, so he can be sure the health claims he makes about his beef are true. He also talks to customers about its taste, its complete source verification and its environmentally sustainable production. But Mr. Harris doesn't think his grass-fed beef can compete consistently with grain-fed beef in the tenderness arena, so he sells all of his product as ground beef, grinding every cut, rather than selling a steak that could be tough.

In order to offer his product year-round, he butchers calves as needed at a local USDA-approved packing plant. Currently, about half of his calf crop heads that way; the rest are sold in the commodity market. Mr. Harris hopes eventually to be able to get that number up to 100 percent and then buy more grass-fed calves from his friends and neighbors, but he does not plan to grow a big company. His intention is simply to add value to his cattle and sell them to consumers on a more local basis.

Though pleased with the success he's had so far, Mr. Harris says he didn't realize the marketing side would be so difficult. But he remains committed to the project. He is taking a long view of its potential. "I have three daughters. All of them love the farm, but they all can't make a living on the farm. If I just stay in commodity beef business, there's no room for all of them to come back here. If I am able to add value to my beef and then extract it back out, maybe there's an opportunity for more of them to come back."