

Food Democracy: Salt of the Earth: White Oak Pastures

"You take care of the land and the land will take care of you."

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Will Harris is a fifth-generation cattleman from southwestern Georgia. His 1,000-acre farm, which has been active since 1866, is a picture-perfect example of what Southern ranching used to be. Wide, green pastures made up of diverse grasses and dotted with majestic white oaks support nearly 700 Angus cows and about 50 Katahdin sheep.

Harris divides his herd into several smaller groups of cows that he rotates to a new pasture every three or four days. When he approaches a mini-herd, he whistles and the cows come trotting over, eager to be let onto a new field of fresh grasses.

Joseph Herndon, regional vice president of purchasing for Whole Foods, has visited Harris's farm. "Will loves his cattle," Herndon says. "Everything he does is about making sure they are getting the best care. It's nice to see someone so passionate about doing it the right way."

Harris is committed to the environmental stewardship of his land. His favorite axiom is, "you take care of the land, and the land will take care of you." He never uses any chemicals, antibiotics, or hormones, and is quick to invite anyone who is interested to come and visit his operation.

Harris's farm wasn't always so ecologically friendly. "Growing up, my family taught me animal husbandry," he said, "but when I went to school at the University of Georgia, they were teaching animal science. Instead of cooperating with nature, they were teaching us to use industrial tools to wrest more from nature than we're due."

By the time Harris took the reins of his family's farm, there was no way to compete commercially using his grandfather's techniques. He was forced to adopt the industrial model. Like most cattlemen in Georgia, he would start his cattle on chemically treated pastures and when they got big enough, would ship them to contained-animal feeding operations in the Midwest. He watched his cows stacked onto trucks for a 30-hour drive to a Nebraska feedlot. With no rest, no food, and no water for the entire journey, the cows would eventually be deposited onto a large, grassless wasteland where they'd be finished on processed grain supplemented with antibiotics and growth hormones.

He recognized that this was not a sustainable model, and he felt a growing dissatisfaction with the business, but he maintains that, at that time, there was no market for healthy, grass-fed beef. "The truth is, raising cattle the right way costs more money. The only way a farmer can do it is if he can find a sophisticated audience who is willing to pay more for beef that is raised humanely." In the 1990s, Harris was dubious that such customers existed in the numbers necessary to make a humane, chemical-free operation profitable.

Then, about three years ago, he began to read of consumers who cared about their health and about environmental sustainability. Scientific studies from the Harvard School of Public Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention were showing grass-fed beef to be healthier and more nutritious than its corn-fed counterpart. Several studies demonstrate that grass-fed beef is higher in omega-3 fatty acids, conjugated linoleic acid, and beta-carotene. And as consumers became more aware of risks associated with factory-farmed cows, such as E. coli and Mad Cow Disease, he started to believe he could find a market for free-range, grass-finished beef.

Harris began his conversion. He stopped using chemicals. He stopped shipping his cows halfway across the country, and he started focusing on the land. With the elimination of herbicides, he began to notice species of flora and fauna that he hadn't seen since he was a boy. This was a fine thing all in all, except for the re-emergence of some

bothersome weeds. In order to combat the problematic plants, Harris brought sheep to his farm. “The ewes love the weeds,” he explains, “so that’s the natural way of getting rid of weeds without using chemicals.” When Harris was a child, his family used goats for the same purpose. Raising cattle in an environmentally responsible and humane way is really a matter of remembering how his father and grandfather used to farm. “I can’t tell you how many times a day I stop and say to myself, ‘how did we use to do that?’”

Harris also plants 500 white oaks every year. They provide shade for the cows and are aesthetically pleasing. “It’s also the right thing to do,” he said. You take care of the land, and the land will take care of you.”

After making the conversion, Harris had to find his target consumer base. This part was tough, but Harris is not easily discouraged. He eventually formed a partnership with Tree of Life, a natural and organic food distribution company. They placed his ground beef in 220 Publix grocery stores and various natural food stores throughout the country. And this July, Harris began to sell his beef to Whole Foods stores in the Southeast region.

Harris is very enthusiastic about his new relationship with Whole Foods. “You know,” he said “some people like to call Whole Foods ‘whole paycheck,’ and that really isn’t fair. They sent no less than ten people down here to do inspections before they allowed my beef to be sold in their stores. They really go above and beyond to make sure they know what they have in [their] store.” Whole Foods is equally pleased with the new partnership. After two weeks of carrying Harris’s beef, people were signing up on waiting lists for his steaks.

Harris insists that marketing isn’t his strong suit. Given that he has single-handedly found his way into two of Georgia’s largest grocery chains, one could argue he’s being modest.

Harris has also made a concerted effort to bring other farmers from the area with him. He says his neighbors want to raise beef the right way, but they don’t because they are afraid they won’t find the market for it. Harris knows it’s difficult, but because he has pioneered relationships with retailers, he is hoping to help his neighbors follow suit.

In the same entrepreneurial spirit that led Harris to reinvent his farm at the age of 50, he has recently undertaken the construction of a fully compliant, USDA-inspected processing facility on his premises. The small-scale abattoir will allow him to process livestock more humanely and will provide a new service to the community. If all goes well, neighboring farmers interested in converting their operations will have easier access to a proper facility, a scarcity in southern Georgia to date. Currently, 80 percent of American beef is processed by just four companies. Building a small-scale plant goes a long way toward ensuring a healthy local economy and eliminating the safety hazards that accompany industrial meat processing. But constructing a facility is difficult work, and the project will take time.

Still, Harris’s friends believe he’s well suited for the task. Connie Dozier has known Harris for 20 years. “He’s a very determined person,” she said. “If he starts something, he usually sees it through. That’s why he’s got such a successful beef operation.”

When Harris isn’t starting new businesses and searching for distribution, he likes to volunteer his time to raise awareness about the benefits of sustainable, grass-fed beef. He is a board member for Georgia Organics, a local organization whose mission is to integrate healthy, sustainable, and locally grown foods into the lives of all Georgians, and he is the Beef Director of the American Grassfed Association (AGA). The AGA is an organization dedicated to protecting and promoting grass-fed producers and products.

Will Harris, in addition to being a dynamic entrepreneur, a responsible steward of the land, and a good neighbor, is a dedicated family man as well. He and his wife, Yvonne, have raised three daughters, who all help out on the farm as their academic and professional careers permit.

Harris says that he wants to get his business to a point where it is an opportunity for his daughters-not an obligation. Still, he thinks farming provides a good lifestyle and he hopes his children will benefit from the family legacy. I can't speak to their personal ambitions, but I hope for the sake of our environment, our local community, and our gastronomic pleasures, that they will choose to follow in their father's footsteps.

WHITE OAK PASTURES

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This is an edited version of a story by Ivey Doyal that originally appeared in the Fall 2007 issue of Edible Atlanta magazine.