

Will grass-fed beef catch on at high-profile Atlanta restaurants?

By Elizabeth Lee

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Published on: 07/31/08

Dawn is just breaking as a group of local chefs gather in a parking lot south of Atlanta, where a tour bus idles.

Before the day ends, they will travel 400 miles, shoot skeet as the temperature blazes toward 95 degrees, chow down on two-inch-thick burgers — and retrace the path of that meat from cattle grazing on nearby pastures to an on-farm slaughterhouse that's the main attraction on this trip. Eight animals pacing around holding pens will turn into sides of beef. And rancher Will Harris may find a few chefs who believe in his vision enough to place White Oak Pastures meat on their menus.

The idea of eating grass-fed beef is newly chic, embraced by the local food movement and a national groundswell of green. But the reality is a harder sell. Convincing chefs and beef lovers to switch from corn-fed isn't as simple as touting the taste of a homegrown tomato.

Unless the meat is properly cooked, muscles that are well-exercised from ambling around pastures can seem tough compared to an animal fattened on corn in a feedlot. Grass-fed beef also is more expensive, a big concern for chefs keeping an eye on rising food prices and increasingly cost-conscious diners.

So earlier this week, the budding Georgia Green Foodservice Alliance took a stab at matchmaking. Created to link chefs with farms around the state, the nonprofit embarked on its first field trip.

The schedule included , butchering demonstrations, farm tours and the killing of several cattle. Still, Harris hoped to keep the busload focused on business.

As some of the city's top chefs stepped off the bus, Harris, an easygoing guy who's rarely without a straw cowboy hat, ran through the ground rules. The group was the first to go through the processing facility, which started operating in May.

No cameras in the slaughterhouse. The animals deserve some dignity. Watch your step around the machinery.

"Please, please, please, be careful," he implores. "It's meant to turn live cattle into beef, not for entertainment purposes."

If there are any doubts, the first stop puts an end to them. A few cattle wait in pens in a large, covered shed next to the plant. Two workers in green rubber aprons and rubber boots step outside and sharpen long knives.

"You've got to learn that food comes from somewhere," says Chip Ulbrich, executive chef of South City Kitchen in Vinings. "If you don't understand the food and what it took to get it there, you take it for granted."

Harris put a half-million of his own money into the \$1.5 million slaughterhouse. Loans from the state and Whole Foods Market account for the rest. A handful of meatpackers process most of the beef sold in America in the Midwest, leaving few options beyond small, state-licensed slaughterhouses for those who want to step outside of the system. It's almost unheard of for a farmer to own a processing facility, especially one with a U.S. Department of Agriculture inspector on the premises. That opens up a larger market for the beef it produces, but also adds costs.

"The chefs are the driver in this," says Harris. "We need to sell more beef than we're selling since we built this plant."

If chefs serve the beef, that could also raise demand elsewhere, Harris figures. If diners see the White Oak Pastures name on a menu, they may seek out his beef in stores.

The plant is shipping beef to Whole Foods Markets, but needs more foodservice customers like the Dunwoody Country Club, where chef Patrick Gebrayel serves White Oak Pastures chop steaks. Gebrayel is on the trip, along with representatives from Sodexo, which runs Emory University's dining services. Emory just started serving Harris' beef.

The cattle are raised without antibiotics or hormones and the farm is certified humane, all qualities that Emory is looking for as part of its sustainability initiative. The meat is also low in food miles, since the cattle go from pasture to plate-ready just a few hundred feet from where they were born.

Those attributes also appeal to restaurant chefs, who see an increasing number of customers looking for locally grown food.

Joe Truex of Repast likes the flavor of grass-fed beef, but doesn't serve any at his Atlanta restaurant. And then there's the price.

"Wow," he says, on hearing that Harris' ground chuck may cost up to three times as much as what he pays now. "I couldn't touch that."

Ulbrich serves grass-fed beef and pork from north Georgia on a Sunday barbecue plate at South City Kitchen, along with some locally grown produce. He's considering adding more beef.

"It's a fine line," he says. "Trying to be more local, and trying to be a good steward of my business."

Butchering beef

Harris sees the plant as a way to preserve the fifth-generation family farm. A photo of his three daughters hangs in the store in front of the plant, and two of them are buzzing around the offices. The chefs wait by the counter there, then don white coats.

They head to the cutting room, where Manny Vizcaino of Buckhead Beef, who has worked as a butcher for 47 years, is taking apart a whole side of beef. It's a rare chance to watch a vanishing art, and the reason some chefs made the trip.

As Vizcaino works his way from the shoulder and its chuck roast through the midsection, with a perfectly carved tenderloin, all the way to the last piece of meat hanging, the bottom round that comes from the back leg, the group snaps photos. A few wander out when Harris announces lunch, grilled burgers on the porch.

The tone changes once the burgers are gone. It's time to go to the killing floor. Instead of looking at a side of beef pulled from a cooler where it's been dry-aging, they'll be watching an animal die.

The steer is restless, so instead of using a captive bolt stun gun, a worker fires a rifle into its head.

A woman covers her eyes. Others in the steamy, unairconditioned room crane to see. To make sure the animal can't sense any pain, a worker touches its eye. No reaction. As the steer's throat is cut vertically, more people leave the room. The crowd is still six deep, and others climb a ladder to get a clear view.

"It's a brutal thing," says David Larkworthy of Five Seasons Brewery, who already serves some grass-fed beef on a menu that relies heavily on local food sources. "But we do eat animals. Death is part of life."

Before they return to the bus, Harris thanks the chefs and other folks — representatives from the state agriculture department, Georgia Organics and two of the country's largest foodservice wholesalers — for visiting the farm.

The bus heads down the driveway, past cattle grazing a few feet away. "This is one of the best days I've ever had as a chef," says Mike Deihl, of the East Lake Golf Club and one of the trip's organizers.

Will it pay off for Harris? It's too soon to tell.

"It's easy to talk about environmental sustainability and humane treatment of animals and integrity of the American family farmer and local food systems, and Slow Food, and food miles, and carbon footprints, and all those words that you hear," he says.

"It's a little more difficult when you've got to write a little bigger check."