

# on earth

From Factory Farm to Grass-Fed Moneymaker

A Georgia farmer shifts away from a monoculture of cattle and sees profits soar with his newly holistic ways.

by [Will Harris](#) • May 14, 2014

In 1866, when my great-grandfather began running our farm in Southwest Georgia, he butchered one cow, a couple of pigs and a few chickens every Saturday. This meat and poultry, along with the vegetables that they grew, fed him and the 100 emancipated slaves that worked for him on the farm. He raised his animals on his pastures, outdoors in the fresh air and sunshine, where they thrived on grass and forage. The cattle grazed, the pigs rooted and the chickens pecked and scratched.

Almost a century later, my father took over the management of our farm, [White Oak Pastures](#). This was after World War II, when traditional farming practices began to be commoditized, centralized, and industrialized. Farms all over the country started to operate like factories, churning out cheap meat with a steep ecological price tag. My father decided to structure our operation as a monoculture of cattle, abandoning the production of other crops and animals for the sake of “efficiency.” He began feeding our cows a high carbohydrate grain ration, in confinement, where they would gain weight three times faster than eating grass on open pasture.

By this point, scientists had discovered that feeding sub-therapeutic levels of antibiotics to livestock caused weight gain and faster growth, so my dad, along with most of the cattlemen in the country, put our cows on drugs. He followed the advice of the newly formed agricultural chemical companies and made heavy and frequent applications of synthetic fertilizer and pesticides to our pastures.

Yet, no one warned us that these new ‘tools’ would wreak unintended consequences on the farm. The dramatically lowered production costs extracted a high toll on the stewardship of our land and on the welfare of our animals. I inherited the farm in my twenties, and for decades I raised cattle just like my father. But with each passing season, and each load of cows shipped to a distant slaughter, there was a slow shift in me.

After years of loading cattle on semi-trucks for cross country shipment, I remember the day that I noticed, for the first time, that the animals on the bottom level were showered with the urine and feces of the animals above them for the days-long trip. It was incredible to me that I hadn’t seen their suffering before. No food, no water, no rest, incomprehensible panic, deplorable conditions.

The pressure to lower cost of production, by any means possible, had made me blind to everything else. Yet, despite our increased pressure on the herd and the land, our profit margins remained razor thin. I could not tolerate the idea of handing my daughters an unhappy herd and a poisoned farm that was in a constant state of financial stress. I wanted to give the next generation -- the fifth generation at White Oak Pastures -- a system that, with hard work as a given, could provide a pleasant lifestyle and a comfortable income for them and their children.

When I started to rethink the farm’s future, I didn’t find answers in the sleek pages of an agricultural magazine, hawking expensive machines and bottles of this and that. The solution wasn’t



technical or even new. What saved our farm was returning to the old holistic farming ways, the ways that my great-grandfather used. We took the cows off grain and antibiotics and returned them to the pasture. We stopped using pesticides and chemical fertilizers. We brought back the chickens and pigs, and added sheep, goats, rabbits, turkeys, geese, guinea fowl and duck. We once again kept the animals outside on pasture at all times.

In order to treat our livestock with respect from birth to death, we built two of the very few humane-kill on-farm abattoirs in the country. One is for red meat species and the other is for poultry. Now we market our products to major retailers like Whole Foods, and serve our meat to guests at the farm restaurant and to staff at the on-site dining hall. We use everything from the tail to the snout, converting tallow into biodiesel, eviscerate into compost, hides into leather, and underutilized meat into charcuterie. Going beyond meat, we planted a huge organic vegetable garden and rented out cabins for eco and agri-tourists to experience country life.

The first year we stopped using synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, the grass was sparse. The topsoil was dead and dry. It wasn't long, though, before the stomp of ruminant hooves and the scratching of bird feet started to build the organic matter in the soil. The animals naturally fertilized the land, as we rotated them from one section of pasture to the next, based on how much they had eaten and how fast the grass was growing. Take a shovel full of White Oak Pasture's soil today, and you'll see a rich organic layer, teeming with life and running several inches deep.

The large-scale agribusiness model treats diversity like it's a liability. We've learned on our farm that nature abhors a monoculture. Broadening to diverse species has only been a benefit. My family has gone from generating revenues of less than half a million dollars each year in conventional beef to selling over \$25 million dollars annually in pasture-raised organic meats. White Oak Pastures has become the largest organic farm in Georgia.

We've scaled up our operation by recruiting 15 other grass-fed cattle producers nearby, all marketed under our label. Fifteen years ago, we had four employees, earning just minimum wage. Today, all of the 100-plus men and women helping us to steward the land and tend the animals make a good living wage.

It's important to me that people understand that we aren't just capitalizing on a niche market, selling to high-end consumers. We are dedicated to producing food that is as healthy to eat as it is sustainable to raise. Our farming practices are literally returning vitality back to the farm, while allowing our animals to live the way Mother Nature intended.

I hope that my winning the NRDC and BFI [Growing Green Sustainable Livestock Producer Award](#) will help other farmers to see the value in organic farming. The market demand has developed for antibiotic-free, pasture-raised, humanely-farmed meats. What makes your soil and animals strong, will make your customers healthy, your employees happy, and your investments profitable. My own family's experience is proof that sustainable farming is economically sustainable too.

*This guest post is by one of the four winners of NRDC's sixth annual [Growing Green Awards](#), which celebrate the farmers, business owners, and bold thinkers who are making America's food system healthier and more sustainable. See all of the posts from this year's winners [here](#).*

<http://www.onearth.org/articles/2014/05/how-to-turn-a-factory-farm-into-a-holistic-organic-livestock-operation-and-make-mil>

