

The Feed Bag



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Will Harris: Bringing the Cows Back Home

I first met Will Harris at the Buckhead Whole Foods in Atlanta. He was standing in front of the meat counter, offering beef samples to a gathering of rapacious customers. He asked passers-by in a deep and dignified southern drawl, reminiscent of a more chivalrous time, if they would be interested in trying some local grass-fed beef. I, for one, could not resist. The combination of boundless charm and local livestock was just too much. So I took my place in line and waited for my meatball. It was delicious.

Will Harris is a fifth generation cattleman from Southwest 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 of diverse grasses, dotted with majestic white oaks support nearly 700 Angus cows and about fifty Katahdin sheep.

Joseph Herndon, Regional Vice President of Purchasing for Whole Foods has visited Harris's farm. "Will loves his cattle," he said. "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."

A committed environmental stewardship of his land, Harris' 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. "A lot of people play games these days," he said, "but that's the thing about getting beef from a local farm. You can come down and see it for yourself."

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 rest more from nature than we're due."

By the time Harris took the reigns 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, he would ship them to Contained Animal Feeding Operations in the Midwest. He watched his cows stacked vertically 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.

Recognizing that this was not a sustainable model, he felt a growing dissatisfaction with the business. Still 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 1990's, Harris was dubious that customers like that existed in the numbers necessary to make a humane, chemical-free operation profitable.

Then, about three years ago, he began to read about consumers who cared about their health and environmental sustainability. Scientific studies from the Harvard School of Public Health and the Center for Disease Control were showing grass-fed beef to be more healthy and nutritious than its corn-fed counterpart. Several studies demonstrate that grass-fed beef is higher in Omega-3's, conjugated linoleic acid (CLA) and beta-carotene. And as consumers became more aware of risks associated with factory-farmed cows, like E. Coli and Mad Cow Disease, he started to believe he could find an audience for free-range, grass-finished beef.

Harris began his conversion. He stopped using chemicals. He stopped shipping his cows half way across the country, and he started focusing on the land. With the elimination of herbicides, he began to notice new species of flora and fauna that he hadn't seen since he was a boy. For the most part that's good, but it also brought new challenges. He saw the reemergence of bothersome weeds too. In order to combat the problematic plants, he brought sheep to his farm. "The ewes love the weeds," Harris 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 used to do that?'"

Harris also plants 500 White Oaks every year. They provide shade for the cows and they are aesthetically pleasing. "It's also the right thing to do," he said.

After Harris had made his conversion, he had to find his target audience. He said it 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 in July, Harris began to sell his beef to Whole Foods stores in the Southeast region.

He 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 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.

An eternally humble man, Harris insists that marketing isn’t his strong suit, but with the distribution he’s found, one could argue he’s being modest. Not only has he single handedly found his way into two of Georgia’s largest grocery chains, he’s made a concerted effort to bring other farmers from his 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 will follow suit.

In the same entrepreneurial spirit that led Harris to reinvent his farm at the age of 50, he has recently undertaken the not-so-small task of constructing a fully compliant, USDA-inspected processing facility on his premises. His small-scale abattoir will allow him to process livestock more humanely and will provide a new service to the community. In the beginning of 2008, neighbors who are interested in converting their farms will have easier access to a proper facility, the likes of which are few and far between in South Georgia.

Right now 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 go hand in hand with industrial meat processing. But constructing a facility is difficult work. It is a two and a half to three year project if everything goes well.

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. The AGA is an organization dedicated to protecting and promoting

grass-fed producers and products.

Will Harris is a dynamic entrepreneur, a responsible steward of the land, a good neighbor, and a committed father. He has a wife, Yvonne and three beautiful daughters, Jessica, Jenni and Jodi, who all help out on the farm.

Harris says that he wants to get his business to a point where it is an opportunity for his daughters and 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.

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