

WHERE THE GRASS IS GREENER

Nearly twenty-five years after Will Harris remade his conventional family farm, Georgia's White Oak Pastures is a model for sustainable farming

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WITH THE MAJORITY OF TODAY'S FARMS cultivating only one crop or livestock, by comparison, the list of animals Will Harris and his team at White Oak Pastures are humanely raising approaches Noah's ark status: cows, chickens, geese, pigs, ducks, sheep, goats, turkeys, bees, and rabbits (plus produce). The large number of certified organic, non-GMO species stands out, but it's not the only thing that makes the 150-year-old, 3,000-acre, sustainable, zero-waste farm in Bluffton, Georgia, an outlier. Will's daughter Jenni, the farm's sales and marketing manager, sums it up best: "We like to say we're radically traditional."

The oxymoron is fitting. It flies in the face of a basic business drive: Make more money faster. Yet the Harris clan clings to another old-fashioned notion too. Money isn't everything. White Oak's farming philosophy may not be as profitable as industrialized systems, but it's fulfilling. And while "radically traditional" appears on billboards fronting Highway 27 near the farm, there are other markers proclaiming the same message. One is the contrast between the area's conventional farms, where clouds of red dust lifting off bare earth swirl across asphalt, and the scene down the way at White Oak, where the grass is truly greener.

ON THE OTHER SIDE

Will's passion is nurturing that grass, and when given the opportunity to show off his lush fields, he swells with enough pride to push the well-worn white cowboy hat right off his head. "That's some damn good grass

there. That's productive land," he says. His speech is slow, and his voice low on the octave range. He's squinting against intense morning sun, pointing out his Jeep window to blankets of thick, healthy grass. It's one of the first fields that got his attention when he made it his mission to heal his family's land.

In the early 1990s, already years into his career, Will became concerned about his cattle—enough to reset his farming methods. His practices were once far from what he preaches now. "Everything that reductionist science has given us achieves what it was meant to do, but there are often unintended consequences," he says. "It's the same with the tools science gave farmers. I was one of them."

And he was excessive. "If the fertilizer said a pint per acre, I'd put a quart," he says. "If the antibiotic said inject cows every thirty days, I'd do every two weeks." This strategy ramped up the number and severity of the aforementioned consequences in ways he couldn't ignore. "I started moving away from all of it, putting down those tools, until I wasn't using any," he says.

Will was in his early forties when he began to make his U-turn. "Dad grew up on this land; it was settled and farmed by his great-great-grandfather after the Civil War," Jenni says. "What our ancestor was doing is very much like what we are doing now." It was Will's grandfather who pushed White Oak into the modern age with its promises of bigger profits.

Owner Will Harris is a fourth-generation stockman. Opposite, from left: A herd of happy goats; honeybees at work. Opening spread: Beef cattle roam freely on the farm.



The first step to take the farm back in time was shifting to pasture-raised, grass-fed beef in 1995. “We believe the most humane way to raise an animal is to raise it in environment where it can fully express its instinctual behavior, to allow it to be itself,” Jenni says. It’s why White Oak hogs laze around puddles when they’re not rooting around with their snouts; why chickens are strutting nearby, stopping to peck and scratch. And it’s why cows are freely roaming and ruminating. “Our animals do what they were made to do,” Jenni says.

The move came when Will began to see his livestock differently. “I’ve always loved animals,” he says. “But, like many, I’d become desensitized.” The conditions endured by cattle being shipped cross-country to feed caught him first. “You’d load a hundred 500

pound calves on a two-level truck with the ones on top shitting and pissing on the ones on bottom,” he says. “We’d pack ‘em in tight in 90 degrees and a day and half later, they’d be in Nebraska freezing. Some would die on the truck. It was a pretty horrible gig.” When he stopped going through the motions, his eyes opened. “Once you start really thinking about something, you’re screwed,” he says. “I was like, ‘Damn. Now I gotta do something about this.’” So he did.

Jenni likes to say the new and improved White Oak Pastures was built on a meatball. Will convinced Publix grocery stores to carry his grass-fed ground beef, but he wanted to make sure it sold, so every weekend he’d head to Atlanta locations and offer shoppers hot, juicy White Oak meatballs to sample. “That’s how he got this all going,” Jenni says. Publix is still a loyal customer; Whole Foods is now the farm’s largest.

Animal welfare remains a primary concern—but without sentimentality. The animals exist

to be eaten; death is a daily reality on the farm. The energy and effort put into the lives of White Oak’s animals follows them to the end. It’s why Will took a financial risk and built the farm’s two abattoirs, making it the only in the country with both USDA-inspected red meat and poultry slaughterhouses onsite.

“We raise animals with dignity and respect, so we’re going to process them in the same manner,” Jenni says. She’s smiling, scanning the cutting floor at the red meat abattoir, where fifteen or so guys in white coats are slicing, cutting, and carving in dance-like sync as they break down half-cattle carcasses to the bumping beat of blaring hip-hop. “Putting music in there was the best thing we’ve done,” Jenni says. “It helps them establish a rhythm.”

Even though they’re slower than an automated system, they’re fast. From a whole animal to butchered carcass takes approximately fifteen minutes, and they’re processing thirty to thirty-five cattle a day, five days a week, all year long. They’re precise too. Ban Stewart, a chef



Will Harris shows off his green pastures. **Opposite, clockwise from left:** Organic okra; grass-fed cows; the front-porch entrance of the White Oak General Store; free-range chickens.

and now White Oak's quality control manager, deems their work artisanal.

Ban and his wife, Allison, joined White Oak in January 2018. She works as the farm's online store manager, and Ban ensures that every cut and package of meat out the door meets customer needs and expectations. His commitment to a quality end product means he's attune to every moment animals spend in the abattoirs. "Animal welfare doesn't stop in the field," he says. The serpentine route that leads cattle to the kill floor, designed by animal welfare expert Temple Grandin, is intended to minimize stress and fear. "Everyone stays calm at every step so they don't get spooked," Ban says. He waves to Cedric Jones, known as Big Cedric, whose height and girth are in line with the nickname and amplify a tender nature. "His demeanor makes a difference," Ban says. "He whistles to them, sometimes whispers something as he brings them in." With no ceremony but obvious care, Cedric uses a captive bolt gun to render the animal senseless, a swift cut at the neck bleeds it out, and a decisive stroke with the sharpest of knives removes the head. It all happens in less than 60 seconds.

HEALING THE LAND

An emphasis on animal welfare was the beginning, but Will's attention has now turned to regenerating his land. The concepts are intertwined. By allowing his herds and flocks to be true to their nature, he's bringing life back to the farm on a microscopic level. "Good land is alive itself," Will says. "I took every soil class offered in my agriculture studies at the University of Georgia, but I'd never been taught that." Cattle, sheep, and goats graze grasses down, which makes them establish deeper roots, protecting the soil against erosion. Hoofs, snouts, and chicken beaks disrupt the dirt and aerate it. Mountains of manure enrich it; chemical fertilizers and herbicides are no longer used. "My daddy's generation knew and understood all this but fell in love with heavy yellow equipment and diesel fuel," Will says. "And my generation, we didn't know it. I am learning it now, and it is so powerful." Even White Oak's grazing schedule is part of the plan. "We let our grass grow taller before grazing," Will says. "We don't get as much daily weight gain on the cows, but we'll get more productivity out of that acre of land."

Will's long-range view influences his

holistic approach as strongly as his personal feelings about what's right. "Everything we do is slower. Our chickens take two times longer to grow than at conventional farms, but going organic and all the changes dad has made, he didn't do it with just this hippie mindset," Jenni says. "You can see the sheer value it's adding to the land. And the re-balancing of the ecosystem has been incredible to watch. There are different insects and different birds here now."



WASTE NOT

Some of these birds and bugs help Bilal Sarwari, the farm's organic garden manager, who's also laser-focused on the land. "We are producing so much food in a smaller space because we're being observant and intentional," he says, walking through one of the garden's greenhouses, making bold predictions about coming crops. "I'm on a mission to grow a great tomato and a lot of them. I'm going to overwhelm with tomatoes; everyone will be



begging me to stop," he laughs. His larger goal is to create a sustainable garden by boosting biodiversity. "We're taking the time to grow things like milkweed to feed monarch butterflies and other pollinators, which helps our crops," he says. "Is it the most efficient way to farm? No. But we do it because we want to farm in a more thoughtful way." He kneels, scoops up a palmful of moist, dark earth, and jostles it in his outstretched hand. "Our health is tied to plant and animal health, and it's all tied to soil health."

The farm's zero-waste policy also stands out; almost everything here has a purpose. Wash water from the abattoirs is treated onsite to be reused for irrigation. Animal entrails become compost that nourishes pastures and the gardens. Tracheas, hides, and other bits go to White Oak's onsite hide barn to become all-natural chew toys for dogs, rugs, or hand-dyed leather totes, pot holders, and more. Fat is melted down to make tallow soaps and candles. These goods, along with the farm's foods, are sold in White Oak's store, housed in a mid-1880's building that was the town general store in a past life.

It's the visible center of another White Oak tenet: revitalizing its community. Almost everyone in Bluffton (population 100) who has a job works for White Oak. And while not all of its 150 employees live in town, many do, and many only came to Bluffton because of it. It's a diverse group that mimics the variety on the farm. "We've got all backgrounds, religions, races, and political affiliations here,"

The farm's grass-fed cows. **Opposite:** Two of White Oak's heritage-breed hogs.

Jenni says. "It shows that we can change the face of farming alongside the methods."

Will's steady, heavy steps on the store's wide-plank wood floors are an echo of his matter-of-fact take on his success, one that puts praise on his employees, including his daughters. "I have surrounded myself with good people; a lot of them are smarter than me," he says. "And having my girls here, that's the best thing."

He's got an equally pragmatic view of his legacy. "When I started this, I thought we'd be innovators changing the way the world produces food. I don't believe that anymore," he says. "I wish everybody would eat the way our customers do so everyone could farm in a way that's good for the land and for animals. But too many people are interested in how much can they get for how cheap. That doesn't support this kind of agriculture."

Jenni agrees. "I see growth in reaching our end consumer directly, meaning more people coming here to visit us to learn about this food system, and more sales online," she says. The website currently has more than 300 items in inventory, everything from duck quarters to Iberico pancetta. This outlook is pushing White Oak to invest in more cabins, maybe even a lodge for visitors, and better order fulfillment.

Will knows he's serving a niche market, but the disinterest of the masses doesn't dent his determination or satisfaction. "I've got a really, really good job," he says. "I feel blessed every day."

Ban points to the top when he shares what drew him and Allison to the farm. "It's not just what they do here, it's Will's attitude too—and a little of this; can you smell that?" he says,

flipping a White Oak ribeye that's sizzling in a cast-iron skillet. "Will's way is about the system being better, not just the end product. He wants it better for all, from the land and the animals to his employees and his customers."

The Will Harris Way is simple, but not easy. It's a circle of careful conservation. "Raising animals correctly, respecting this land, and making a living doing it," he says, "that's what I want to leave behind." And he takes his stewardship seriously. "These acres, these animals, they're not mine. I only have custody of them, and I owe it to them to do this right."

SEE FOR YOURSELF

White Oak Pastures is happy to show off every aspect of its principles at work, while also sharing its bucolic pace and peace. Guests are invited to immerse themselves in farm life with a stay at one of four cabins scattered among dense pines across from garden plots or at the two-bedroom Pond House, where they're lulled to sleep by humming bugs (all safely outside) and braying cattle. A coffee or a cocktail on the Pond House dock often yields alligator and bald eagle sightings. Tours, run by Will's daughter Jodi Benoit, are by appointment during the week and every Saturday at 11 am. They start with some history, go to the hide barn, and end with a walk through both abattoirs. "The tours let us show people what we do in an experiential way," Jodi says. "There are not many farms that encourage you to come see how they're producing your food." Short on time?

Opt for lunch at the farm's dining pavilion, where you'll feast on grass-fed beef burgers, beef tongue tacos, and salads piled high with the farm's fresh veggies at long picnic tables, often alongside many of the farm's team. The farm store is a can't-miss stop, too, stocked with White Oak's meats, produce, eggs, soaps, and candles, plus other Georgia-grown and made products.