

Grass-fed Beef Producer Revives Old Business model, Creates New Jobs

Will Harris's day starts much like his father's and his grandfather's and his great-grandfather's did: with his boots planted firmly in the same fresh-smelling, fertile soil of his ancestral farm in Early County, Georgia.

Like a cherished family tradition, the natural cattle-raising method Harris follows at White Oak Pastures resembles that practiced a hundred years ago, and he processes his "All Natural Grass-fed Beef" in a USDA-inspected plant on the farm. But it hasn't always been this way.

"During the latter half of the 20th century, our farm produced calves for the industrial agricultural system that furnishes most of the food we eat in this country," says Harris. "We made the conscious decision to return to a production system that is better for the environment, better for our cattle and for the health of the people who eat our beef."

Harris began to change his farm's business model from commoditized cattle producer to natural beef company in 1995. After successfully adopting certified humane practices for raising his cattle, Harris had to transport them 90 miles for processing, so he decided to build his own plant and needed funding.

He contacted business consultant David Dunn at the Albany office of the Georgia SBDC Network for help in building an on-site processing plant.

"We knew this method was better for animal welfare, more sustainable, produced an artisan product, and that it cost more. The question was, were

there enough sophisticated consumers who would pay the premium needed to cover the added costs of providing these benefits?" says Harris. "'Build it, and they will come' does not always work."

Dunn helped Harris develop a business plan and referred him to John McKissick of the University of Georgia's Center for Agribusiness and Economic Development, who helped with a feasibility study.

Harris acquired funding to build his processing plant and opened it in June 2008. He has exceeded his early estimated capacity and processes 75 cows per week. White Oak Pastures beef is sold in all Whole Foods markets in the South and along the coast from Miami to Princeton, New Jersey. Buckhead Beef and Destiny Organics distribute it to fine dining restaurants throughout the South. It is also available at Publix and Harry's Farmers Markets.

The farm's payroll grew from 2 to 28 employees,

all at wages above the minimum. "If we didn't work vertically (from raising cattle to processing the beef) we'd have only three at minimum wage," says Harris. White Oak Pastures beef has won the Flavors of Georgia contest in 2008, conducted by The University of Georgia's Agribusiness Center.

"David and the SBDC have been a great help.

They brought resources to our business that probably wouldn't have been available otherwise," says Harris. "We're really pleased at the success we've had. It was a high-risk venture – there were a lot of sleepless nights."

"Will Harris is a can-do type who pursues his goals," says Dunn. "It has been challenging for him: re-educating his public, educating his lenders and getting into the right distribution channels. Many of the networks we lined him up with have worked out well for him."



THE BUSINESS OF BEEF: Will Harris of White Oak Pastures, left, accepts the Flavors of Georgia award from Governor Sonny Perdue.