

**W**hen the tour guide at White Oak Pastures asked our group where we all were visiting from, I wasn't surprised to hear people answer "Atlanta," "Orlando" or "Valdosta." But I was a little startled when one couple raised their hands and said, "We're from Pennsylvania." And everyone in the group perked up when another family volunteered, "We're from Alaska." Had folks really journeyed 3,600 miles, clear across the country, to experience a family-run farm in tiny Bluffton, Georgia? Amazingly, they had. But then again, White Oak Pastures isn't your average farm, and the Harrises are no ordinary family.

Located near Georgia's Kolomoki Mounds State Park, and not far from the Alabama border, White Oak Pastures raises 10 species of animals, including cattle, turkey, rabbits, and sheep, on land that has been in the Harris family since 1866. In 1995, patriarch Will Harris made the momentous

# ROAD TRIP TO WHITE OAK



decision to turn back the clock, to a time before industrialized agriculture and the use of pesticides, herbicides, antibiotics, and hormones. The Harrises and their staff worked to create a zero-waste farming model, where animals graze on nutrient-rich soil in wide pastures, with pigs, goats, chickens, turkeys, ducks, and geese able to express their instinctive behaviors.

Livestock are slaughtered in their abattoir, designed by famed animal behaviorist Temple Grandin. As daughter Jodi Harris Benoit tells me, "It's radical, but honestly it's not. [Farming] has gotten so far removed from our ancestral ways." Both online and at their General Store, the farm sells everything from grass-fed ground lamb to iberico pork sausage, along with peach jelly, honey, and barbeque rubs. Crafting cowhide rugs, leather backpacks, and pet chews ensures that no part of an animal is wasted.

It's White Oak Pastures' radically traditional approach that motivates travelers from far and wide to buy tour tickets on any given Saturday morning. "Never did Daddy think that this town of 200 people would become a destination," Benoit says. "Never did we intend on getting into the tourism business."

Nevertheless, the Harrises have become agritourism leaders, single-handedly reviving the nearly defunct town of

Bluffton. Visitors can stay overnight in rental cabins, eat in their restaurant, shop for leather goods, and take a horseback tour. "People want to see it and experience it," Benoit tells me. "People who come to Bluffton are trying to find something to support."

In addition to selling its meats to consumers and chefs, White Oak Pastures works hard to spread its farming philosophy. In 2021, Will Harris founded the Center for Agricultural Resilience (CFAR), a non-profit dedicated to education and training. Executive Director Dr. Carly Redding tells me that CFAR has worked with corporations like General Mills as well as environmental attorneys and industrial farmers looking to convert their own operations.

"We consider ourselves fortunate to engage with such a wide array of passionate individuals, all dedicated to making a positive impact in the realm of regenerative agriculture," says Redding. Having heard the term "regenerative agriculture" a lot, I ask her to define the concept for a layperson like me. First and foremost, Redding clarifies, it's a holistic approach that aims to go beyond mere sustainability.

"It emphasizes the interdependence between soil health, biodiversity, and agricultural practices," she explains. "[It] seeks to regenerate degraded land, improve soil fertility,



**WHITE OAK PASTURES**

**ESTABLISHED: 1866, LOCATED: CLAY COUNTY**

**SPECIALTY: GRASS-FED BEEF, HERITAGE PORK, IBERICO PORK,**

**GRASS-FED LAMB, PASTURED CHICKEN & POULTRY, ORGANIC**

**VEGETABLES, ARTISANAL GOODS**



enhance ecosystem functioning, and promote the well-being of farmers and communities.”

Will Harris will next communicate the White Oak Pastures manifesto in a brashly-titled new book, *A Bold Return to Giving A Damn*. Taking such a strong stance on land and animal management, inevitably the Harrises encounter their share of naysayers and detractors, who argue it's just not practical for the average farm to adopt these practices. But Redding points out there are economic upsides of not having to buy fertilizers and pesticides and being able to market a premium, grass-fed product. Regenerative agriculture has environmental upsides too. “It promotes soil carbon sequestration,” Redding points out, “reducing greenhouse gas emissions. It also helps to conserve water resources and reduce soil erosion.”

If our tour group is any measure, White Oak Pastures' popularity seems to be growing. Before I leave this farmland, with its expansive

*The restaurant at White Oak is a big draw for the small town.*

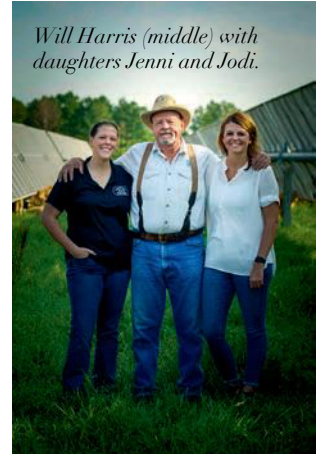


rolling fields, I can't resist purchasing a few souvenirs: organic strawberries, sausages, and a t-shirt that reads “In Soil We Trust.” Soap and moisturizer made from animal tallow also wind up in my shopping bag. I tell Benoit that I've never used anything made from tallow. “My grandmother used tallow to moisturize her skin,” she says. “People think it's radical, but it's what nature provided.”

Driving away after lunch, I can't help but feel inspired. And that's when it hits me. The visitor experience at White Oak Pastures isn't just about farming methods, horseback rides, or grass-fed beef. Ultimately, the Harrises are selling something that no amount of money can buy: a hopeful environmental message.

**More information is available at [whiteoakpastures.com](http://whiteoakpastures.com).**

*Written by Laura Albritton*



*Will Harris (middle) with daughters Jenni and Jodi.*



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