

NOTES FROM A FARM:

GIBSON FARMS

# Hoofing It

BY M. LINDA LEE

SUN DAPPLES THE FIELDS AS CATTLE FARMER LELAND Gibson steers his silver pickup truck over rolling pastures tinged emerald with knee-high grass. He hops out to open one last gate, and we pull into a fenced field and park near a large cedar tree. Under its spreading branches, a herd of Black Angus cows clusters in the shade. Several recently born calves, some all-black, some red, some with white-blotched faces, huddle around their mothers.



Not 25 feet away from us stands a massive black bull named Big Boy. As we emerge from the truck, Big Boy lifts his huge brown eyes and holds his ground, while some of the cows step shyly forward, curious about the newcomers. Then Gibson does something surprising. Without hesitating, he walks over to the 2,000-pound bull and rubs the animal's head. Unexpectedly, Big Boy appears to enjoy the attention.

Unlike many intact bulls, Big Boy is unusually docile. Part of that is genetic to the Angus breed; and part, perhaps, is because Big Boy is accustomed to his gentle owner being in the pasture. Whatever the reason, the bull seems unfazed by our presence. "I just have one bull right now," says Gibson, "and I keep

him in the pasture with the cows year-round." When I quip that this bull must be one happy guy, the soft-spoken farmer cracks a smile. "Big Boy is batting a thousand," he laughs. "There's not a cow out there that doesn't have a calf."

Keeping a bull with cows year-round is not standard practice in conventional cattle farming, where cows are impregnated by artificial insemination so the farmer can control when the calves are born. Then again, Leland Gibson is no conventional farmer.

Gibson owns the only USDA Certified Organic cattle farm in South Carolina, an achievement that makes him proud. This was his goal in 2010, when he left his contracting business in Lynchburg, Virginia, and moved back to South Carolina to help his father tend the family's 200-acre cattle farm in Westminster, about 50 miles south of Greenville. "I fell in love with being here again," the gentleman farmer admits. "For the first time in 30 years, I've finally found my home."

Convinced by friends in Virginia that organic was the way to go, Gibson devoted himself to learning all he could about raising cows on grass without using chemicals, antibiotics or hormones. "You don't need those things if you manage your herd properly," he claims. Then there's the taste. Not only does organic grass-fed beef taste better than its corn-fed counterpart, but it is significantly higher in vitamins and good omega-3 fatty acids.

Gibson experiments with a combination of impact and mob grazing. By rotating his animals between 16 compact pastures once a week, the cattle are not exposed to harmful parasites that grow in the manure. And the cows don't return to the same pasture for 28 days, a period longer than the parasites' life cycle. The cows love changing pastures. "When I open the gate, they spin and run and buck," says Gibson. "They follow me like a bunch of puppies."

Alternately, he puts all three of his herds (roughly 90 head



on one 20-acre plot where the cows roam freely. In the two to three days that they stay on one plot of land, the cows "mow" the grass, feasting first on sweet clover and Lakota Brome, a high-protein New Zealand prairie grass. What they don't eat, they trample, thus creating a new layer of healthy soil without the use of commercial fertilizers.

If Gibson has a beef with any part of the process, it's with pulling weeds. However, thanks to his sustainable grazing practices, the cows do most the tedious weed-clearing for him. "I think there's actually less work involved in having an organic farm," he says. "And deep in my heart, I feel it's the best way to operate."

## A Market Apart

In addition to owning South Carolina's only certified organic cattle farm, Leland Gibson has another distinction. He is one of a dozen local producers who qualify to participate in the Slow Food Upstate Earth Market. Launched in Greenville in May 2011 as the first of its kind in the U.S., this community-operated market attracted Gibson because his own beliefs dovetail with the Slow Food philosophy of "good, clean and fair" food. Unlike other farmers markets, all Earth Market products must be locally and sustainably raised without the use of pesticides, herbicides, antibiotics, hormones or genetically modified organisms.

"I appreciate that the Earth Market recognizes artisan products, and the standards are such that not everyone can achieve them," Gibson says.

Aside from grass-fed beef, the Greenville Earth Market offers organic vegetables and fruits, eggs, and Sourwood honey. The market is held from May through September on the third Wednesday of the month (3pm-7pm) on NOMA Square in front of the Hyatt hotel (221 N. Main St.). [slowfoodupstate.com](http://slowfoodupstate.com).



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