

## BEYONCE'S NIGHT

Singer wins five Grammys, tying record

NEWS, A4



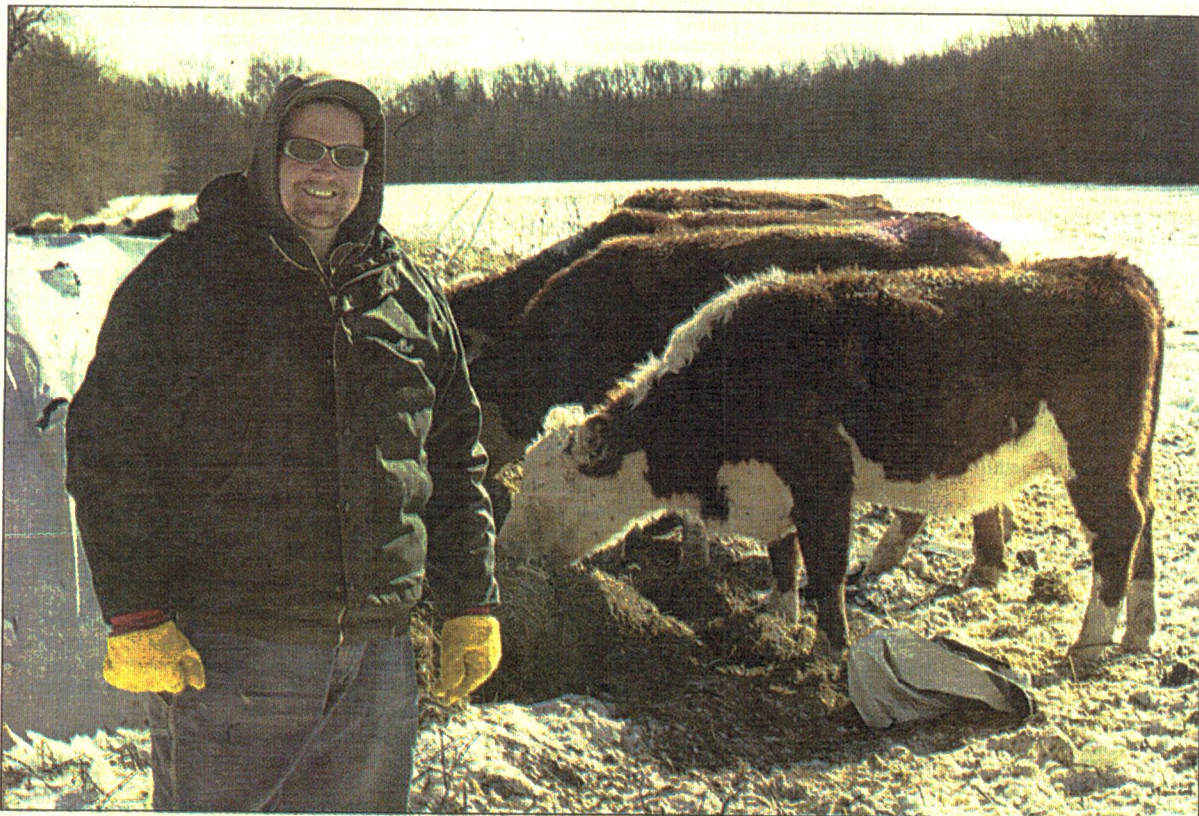
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Staff photos by Martin Griff

Kelly Harding of Cherry Grove Farm in Lawrence with some of his cattle. He raises animals that eat only grass.

## Going against the grain

### Farmer's cattle eat only grass

By KRISTINA FIORE  
Special to The Times

LAWRENCE — Kelly Harding wants to “simplify” life, or so a wooden plaque above the kitchen doorway in his two-story farmhouse suggests.

His ideals are modest: return folks to the days of knowing who raises the food they eat, and provide healthy, natural meat to familiar customers.

Yet accomplishing his goals is more complex in the midst of New Jersey's rising organic culture. Harding says he wants to take the idea of organic food to an even higher

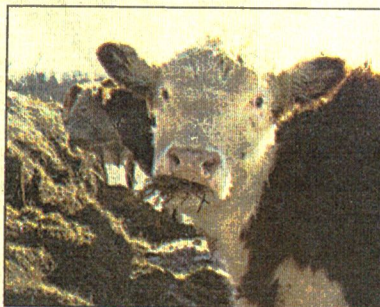
level. In his words, it's his attempt to go “beyond organic.”

Today's organic label on beef is awarded to any farm that allows its cattle to graze freely but does not restrict grain from the animals' diets, Harding said.

His cattle, however, don't feed on grains or other fodder alien to their natural diet. Harding's cattle eat only grass.

“There was a time in my life when I thought that if you don't feed a cow grain, it will die,” Harding said. “That's not true. They manage themselves on grass just fine.”

Harding began his venture, Cherry Grove  
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The grass-fed beef is an attempt to take the idea of organic farming to another level. No matter what the temperature is, the cattle reportedly thrive outdoors.

# BEEF

## Lawrence farmer's cattle eat only grass

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Farm, in September 2002 on Route 206 in Lawrenceville. Farms such as Cherry Grove gained popularity after last month's scare over mad cow disease. The episode in Washington state sent many consumers searching for alternatives to their usual supermarket meats.

Harding says grass-fed beef offers a number of advantages over "industrial farming," as he calls it, where feedlot cattle often eat hormones and antibiotics in their daily diets to enhance growth.

"We figure out how animals act in nature and mimic that as much as we can," Harding said. "You realize you don't need all this stuff — huge barns and what not."

Cattle on Harding's 200-acre farm graze for fresh shoots in the spring and summer and dine in the winter on grass harvested during the more fruitful seasons. No matter what the temperature, the cattle thrive outdoors, where being out in the open relieves stress and tension, he said, and makes meat much more palatable.

According to Harding, it's a natural process. His cattle are not cooped up in a barn, and illness does not run rampant among his herd. Their immune

## Nutritional value of grass-fed beef

**1. Lower in fat** content and calories: Six ounces of grass-fed beef has almost 100 fewer calories than a similar serving of grain-fed beef.



**2. Higher in vitamins** A and E and Omega-3 fatty acid, the "good fat" commonly found in fish and thought to help prevent high blood pressure and an irregular heartbeat.

**3. Thought to be high in CLA** (Conjugated Linoleic Acid), another "good fat" that may help prevent cancer.

Source: From studies compiled by Eat Wild, a clearing-house for information about pasture-based farming.

Times graphic by Laura Sommerville

systems are also buffered because cows are ruminants, and grass provides them with most of their daily dietary needs, Harding said.

If by chance a cow does come down with something, it's never treated with antibiotics. That is a standard set by the U.S. Department of Agriculture for all organic food.

And the health benefits to the cow are passed along to the consumer. Studies indicate meat from grass-fed cattle is leaner and more likely to ease everything from obesity to high blood pressure.

According to Hope Gruzlovic, public information officer for the state Department of Agriculture, organic farm standards cover ev-

erything from what the animals are fed to how they are cared for from birth until they're sold. While policies against antibiotic use are strict, Harding said other policies can be interpreted in a number of ways.

To be certified organic, for example, the cows must have access to a grazing pasture. That doesn't mean they must roam it all day; they can graze for a certain amount of time. But they also can be fed organic grain, Harding said. His operation specifies only grass-fed beef.

"The animals are made to eat forage," Harding said. "When you feed them grain, you ruin the nutritional value of the meat."

According to 2002 statistics, there were about 900 farms in New Jersey that produced at least one beef cow, according to the state Department of Agriculture. Fifty-five beef farms were certified organic, but there were no statistics available for grass-fed only farms.

For some farmers, grass-fed beef farming is like a cottage industry, where one or two cows are raised on grass and then sold for their beef.

But grass-fed farming also has its drawbacks.

According to Mike Westendorf, extension specialist in the Department of Animal Science at Rutgers University, a major disadvantage is that a grass-fed cow takes longer to reach a marketable weight.

"People will continue to eat beef that's coming out of feedlots unless something major shows

*There was a time in my life when I thought that if you don't feed a cow grain, it will die. That's not true. They manage themselves on grass just fine.'*

**Kelly Harding**  
Cherry Grove Farm

us we shouldn't be doing that," said Westendorf. "Grass-fed farming requires more land, and it's more expensive. For most grass-fed farmers, it's not their primary occupation, and I think it would be difficult to make a living strictly with grass-fed beef."

But Harding is not deterred. He says the natural elements and health aspects of grass-fed beef are far too important to overlook. He also said there has to be a better way to produce it.

"(Industrial farms) operate like factories," Harding said. "If we ignore nature and try to take out what is inherently biological, we're trying to make (farming) work like a factory."

Harding is no stranger to industrial farming. He grew up in Maryland and started learning and practicing agriculture when he was 13. At one point in his career, Harding worked on a hog farm that kept about 8,000 swine. He recalls administering antibiotics to the animals every single day.

"I just thought, 'Hey, this is what's going on in agriculture, I better do it,'" Harding said. "But it's really drudgery to a certain degree."

When Harding discovered the advantages of organic and grass-

fed farming, he quickly changed his line of work.

"(A grass-fed farm) is always changing," he said. "You have to adapt to things, like the climate. On a farm like this, you have to think."

Since he has such high standards for taking his farm "beyond organic," Harding thinks and cares a lot about his cattle, especially the 40 head that graze his frozen land this winter. He makes sure the cows have an abundant supply of previously harvested grass and that they are always comfortable. The average cow consumes about 40 pounds of grass each day, he said.

Harding says his customers pick up their meat personally — there is no delivery service or middle market. All the meat is slaughtered and packaged by a local butcher who runs another family-owned business, Harding said. Many of his cows are slaughtered in the fall and he keeps the beef frozen until it's sold.

"People are glad we're here," Harding said, pointing out that he has customers who come from New York City and eastern Pennsylvania. "They're amazed that there's a farm raising cattle

only 2 miles from Trenton and 3 miles from Princeton."

Even though Harding's meat costs about \$1 per pound more than supermarket beef, he finds his customers are generally satisfied.

"(Our customers) love it," said Elizabeth Hunt, who serves grass-fed beef at her Lawrenceville Inn restaurant. "It tastes like it did when I was a kid, which is how meat is supposed to taste."

Hunt added that she usually orders beef that's 20 percent fat and 80 percent lean, "just like the old days."

"You can hardly buy that in the store anymore," said Hunt. "It's usually 7 percent fat and 93 percent lean, and that takes the taste out of the meat."

While Harding's operation is thought to be one of only a handful of grass-fed farms in New Jersey, organic food is a fast growing niche-market here, according to Gruzlovic.

"Farmers who are able to sell with the organic label are able to tap into this niche market of people interested in organic food, especially as consumers are more interested in knowing about their food, how it was produced and where it was produced," she said.

Harding thrives on that kind of personal knowledge. The sign in front of his business and the farm's Web site is as close as he comes to advertising.

"Public opinion is that people are not a part of nature," Harding said. "That's not true. We really are. And it's nice to be involved in it, in this natural process, as opposed to an industrial farm."