

TRAVEL

REGIONAL TRAVEL

Ohio farm overnight offers a local food message, served with a choice of bacon or sausage



Farm dog Roscoe leads visitors on a tour of 50-acre Woodland Ridge Farm in Athens. Photos by Susan Glaser, The Plain Dealer

A trip to Athens offers several enjoyable farm-focused activities.



The Athens Farmers Market, celebrating its 50th anniversary in 2022, showcases produce and more from more than 50 vendors every Saturday and Wednesday.

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ATHENS — Even the rooster slept in on the rainy morning of my visit to Woodland Ridge Farm.

Maybe we both needed the extra rest. I don't typically think of farms as places for leisurely mornings or lingering afternoons. I got both at Woodland Ridge, on 50 rolling acres just south of Athens in Southeast Ohio.

The property is owned by Paul Harper, a former teacher and college administrator turned farmer, who is on a mission to change the way we think about food and farming, one guest at a time.

"There's a lot of benefit just from being out in the country and hearing the birds sing and seeing the cattle graze," he said.

I made the trip to Southeast Ohio in part to spend time with my daughter, a recent Athens transplant. She had discovered Harper's farm as part of a work project and invited me to join her for an overnight stay.

Harper didn't intend to start a hospitality business. A former administrator at Hocking College, Harper bought the farm in 1995, started living there in the early 2000s and then decided to occasionally rent out space to overnight guests, an early Airbnb pioneer. His venture is part of a growing trend among small farmers engaged in agritourism, which combines



Overnight guest can interact with the animals as much or as little as they want to.

agricultural work and tourism in the form of farm tours, pumpkin patches and corn mazes.

Today the hospitality part of the business generates more income than the farm, but that's OK with Harper, who thinks there's plenty of value in connecting city folk to country life.

"If you don't have a farm, we want you to think of this as your farm," he told me and my daughter.

And so we did. During breaks in the rain, we wandered



Colorful chickens at Woodland Ridge Farm B&B in Athens.

the pasture in search of Harper's small herd of six cattle, including a calf born just days before our visit. We petted the goats (and the dogs) and chased down the colorful chickens for photographs.

And we feasted, with our choice of sausage or bacon (or both), made from Harper's pigs.

It was one of several farm-focused experiences I had during my visit to Athens, which also included:

› A trip to the Athens Farmers Market, celebrating its 50th anniversary in 2022,

with more than 50 vendors selling everything from radishes to rhubarb, steak and eggs. My daughter and I left with an overflowing bag of arugula, coffee, cheese, basil plants and pecan pie. (The market runs 9 a.m.-noon Saturdays and Wednesdays at 1002 East State St.; see athensfarmersmarket.org)

› Perusing a small exhibit that celebrates the market's history, "From Farm to Table," at the Southeast Ohio History Center, 24 W. State St., in the historic former First Christian Church in uptown Athens. The market, one of Ohio's oldest, launched in the summer of 1972 with just three producers set up on a runway at the former Ohio University airport. (Admission is \$5; see athenshistory.org)

› Enjoying a glass of Riesling at Shade Winery, just south of Athens, a lovely space created by former Clevelander Neal Dix. We followed the winery visit with dinner at Zoe's, one of several restaurants in Athens that makes good on its farm-to-table promise (the vegetable gnocchi was spectacular).

The farm overnight, however, was the highlight.

Harper rents out two properties on the farm, with a third option coming soon.

My daughter and I stayed in a one-bedroom apartment on the second floor of the barn, overlooking the pasture. It was a perfect space for two, with a queen bed and couch, a full kitchen, and a Swedish-made waterless toilet that came with detailed instructions on how to use it.

The fridge was stocked with much more than we needed for breakfast — fresh eggs, sausage, bacon, fruit, granola, Snowville milk and more.

Adjacent to the barn, and still under construction, is a small, two-story building that will house a commercial kitchen for future farm-to-table gatherings on the first floor, with a guestroom above. Harper anticipates that it will be ready for overnight guests this summer.

Also on the property is a large, four-bedroom house that Harper built shortly after buying the farm. He initially lived in the house while renting out individual bedrooms — until he got one too many requests to rent out the whole home.

So he fixed up the 1906-era farmhouse, also on the property, and lives there now.

"I was a 4-H'er in high school," said Harper, 67, who spent his early years in Northfield Center Township, but moved to a farm in Ritchie County, West Virginia as a child. "My uncle raised sheep.

SEE FARM, K2

REGIONAL TRAVEL

Farm overnight offers a local food message, with a choice of bacon or sausage



Overnight accommodations at Woodland Ridge Farm include a four-bedroom house and a one-bedroom apartment. Photos by Susan Glaser, The Plain Dealer

FROM K1

We raised cattle. I didn't know anything about pigs."

So, naturally, he started with pigs. Harper once owned as many as 60, though they were gradually sold off, as ham and pork chops, to individual customers and local vendors, including Avalanche Pizza, Jackie O's and Kindred Market.

Harper is an advocate of a farming practice known as restorative (or regenerative) agriculture — using animals to help rebalance and restore damaged land. His property was filled with trash, poor soil and destructive vegetation when he bought it, and he's gradually nursed it back to health with help from a rotating mix of pigs, goats and cows.

A duo of sheep are due to arrive later this spring. "We need the lawn mowing help," he said, noting, "We'll eat the lawn mowers at the end of the summer."

Harper also believes the best farming lessons are accompanied by food. "That's the best way to get people engaged," he said. "Feed them."

Toward that end, last summer he and his partner launched a series of Friday afternoon picnics and evening supper clubs, which he is hoping to start up again this year. He has also hosted beginner-farmer workshops, butchering seminars, farm tours and other public events designed to educate and engage.

Overnight guests are welcome to interact with the land and the animals as much or as little as they want. Kids can collect eggs and lead the goats around the property; adults can tour the land while learning more about the benefits of locally sourced food, grass-fed beef and other topics.

Or they can forget all about formal farm education and just relax.

The rooster might even let you sleep in.

IF YOU GO

Woodland Ridge Farm B&B and Event Center

Where: 4884 Cooper Road, Athens

How much: The four-bedroom house rents for \$350 on weekends, \$250 during the week; the one-bedroom apartment is \$75-\$125 per night, depending on the number of people and day of the week.

More information: woodlandridge.net, facebook.com/woodlandridgectr, athensohio.com



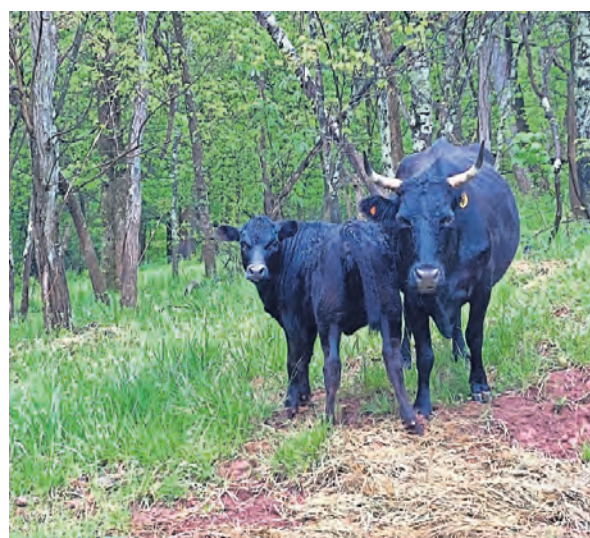
Farmer Paul Harper inside what will be another overnight guestroom at Woodland Ridge Farm.



Nicholas Bolton, who works at Woodland Ridge Farm, stops to greet the Goat Boys as dogs Girty and Roscoe vie for attention.



Overnight accommodations include a four-bedroom house and a one-bedroom apartment.



Mama cow and calf and Woodland Ridge Farm B&B in Athens.