

# Lunch at Rabbit Ridge

**D**rilling activity has slowed considerably in the Fayetteville Shale Play due to the decline in natural gas prices in recent years. In February, Southwestern Energy announced that it had put its assets in this gas-producing area of Arkansas on the auction block. There's still enough action in the Damascus area, though, that I was told to look for white Southwestern Energy pickups in the parking lot. That's how I would know that I had reached Rabbit Ridge Farms in time for Wednesday lunch.

Podcast partner Paul Austin and I leave at 10 a.m. after teaching our summer class for LifeQuest of Arkansas at the Second Presbyterian Church in west Little Rock. We head north out of Conway on U.S. 65 and take a left at Damascus on Arkansas 285. We drive about five miles to the community of Rabbit Ridge. We take a right onto a gravel road, and in less than a mile we see the large Rabbit Ridge Farms special-events venue in the middle of a pasture. Just as promised, there are the Southwestern Energy trucks as employees show up for lunch.

The invitation from Alan Mahan had proved irresistible. Lunch is only served on Wednesdays. If we would drive up, Alan promised that he would serve us a sampling of beef, chicken and pork, all raised on the farm. The vegetables are from a local vendor. The meal is as good as advertised.

"All of this protein is from Rabbit Ridge," he says as he brings our plates out of the kitchen.

Rabbit Ridge is in a hilly area where Faulkner, Van Buren and Conway counties come together. Before this was natural gas country, it was dairy country. I can remember seeing large tankers of milk on Highway 65 when my father, who loved to quail hunt in the area, would bring me here as a boy.

"In the 1920s and 1930s, dairy production was emphasized by county agents with the University of Arkansas as a means of economic development in rural communities, especially in the Ozark Mountains and near urban areas," Jodie Pennington writes for the Encyclopedia of Arkansas



**Rex Nelson**

History & Culture. "Dairy cows on farms increased from 349,000 in 1930 to 482,000 in 1943, with milk per cow of 2,880 pounds a year. At that point, milk per cow began a steady increase as dairy cows' numbers declined. ... Central Arkansas Milk Producers, a milk-marketing cooperative, played a prominent role in the 1960s and 1970s in the consolidation of milk-marketing cooperatives, as its leaders and managers were integral to the formation of Associated Milk Producers Inc., at one time the largest national milk-marketing cooperative. The managers, including some Arkansans, received national notoriety for illegal payments to politicians as they tried to influence the price of milk at the national level. In the mid-1980s, a milk-diversion program and a whole-herd buyout from the federal government resulted in a decrease in milk production and the number of dairy farms."

The dairy industry in Arkansas has been in decline ever since. In 1989, there were 852 dairy farms in the state. That number had declined to about 140 by 2010 and continues to fall.

"I can remember when there were almost 70 dairy farms in these three counties," Mahan says. "There are now only two or three."

Mahan's grandfather raised dairy cattle in the area, as did his father. Mahan, who graduated from high school in 1986, knew that his future wouldn't be in dairy farming. He began a commercial beef operation and also was a building contractor for a number of years. One of his projects was the woodwork at the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville.

Mahan married his wife Angela, who hails from Burdette in Mississippi County, in 2013. They decided that the only meat served in their house would be that produced on their farm. There already were cattle there. They decided to add pigs. A

trip to buy one pig turned into the purchase of seven sows, a boar and several piglets. Chickens were added to the mix last year.

**T**he couple was at a festival in Little Rock promoting Rabbit Ridge's beef and pork on a July day two years ago when the temperature topped 100 degrees.

"There was a kids' karaoke stage on one side of us and a dog park on the other," Alan Mahan says. "It was miserable. We decided there had to be a better way to sell these products."

Rather than going to festivals, Mahan chose to bring people to the farm. The Venue at Rabbit Ridge Farms can handle events with up to 400 people in attendance. There are four bedrooms for those who want to spend the night. Along with Wednesday lunch, special dinners and breakfasts are advertised on the farm's social media sites.

"We bring chefs here along with the other people we sell to," Mahan says. "Before we built this, we had seven large freezers at the house. We later added utility trailers."

There's now a retail shop where Rabbit Ridge products can be purchased. When Mahan got serious about producing bacon and hams, he visited country ham and bacon expert Allan Benton in Madisonville, Tenn. Mahan later contacted Edward Ruff of Morrilton Packing Co. (the producer of Petit Jean brand meats) to cure and package the pork he produces, using the Rabbit Ridge label.

"We're shipping gift boxes from Oregon to Key West," Mahan says. "Arkansas had been behind the times in the farm-to-table movement, but we're catching up. Restaurants like Trio's and the Root in Little Rock now serve our products. People are showing up here on a daily basis to make purchases. I feel like I'm now doing what I was intended to do in life."

Senior Editor Rex Nelson's column appears regularly in the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette. He's also the author of the Southern Fried blog at [rexnelsonsouthernfried.com](http://rexnelsonsouthernfried.com).