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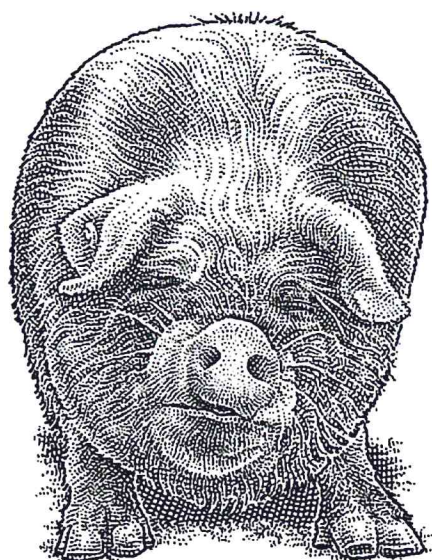
America Has a Bacon Problem: Our Pigs Aren't Fat Enough

A hankering for lardier pork chops and greasier sausages has butchers scrambling to acquire the porky breeds of yore

By Julie Wernau

July 28, 2017 11:33 a.m. ET

The day Aaron Foster finally got the full allotment of pork carcasses he'd ordered for his butcher shop in Brooklyn, the anxiety he'd felt during five long months of waiting melted away.



Heritage pig

"These pigs had red, red, red meat," says the 35-year-old shop owner, "and amazing, thick back fat."

For decades, hog farmers have been breeding animals to produce a leaner, pinker, lower-fat variety of meat that would calm their customers' fears of clogged arteries. Lately, however, the strategy has run into an obstacle few people saw coming: a legion of foodies who think skinny pigs make for dry, bland meat.

The growing clamor for greasy bacon, sausages stuffed with supple lard, and pork chops oozing with deep, scrumptious, oleaginous flab is so strong, in fact, that a problem has developed. America has a shortage of flabby pigs.

After deciding to search for a new local source of pork chops in December, Mr. Foster had to patiently woo an upstate New York farmer just to get his hooks on a single portly Ossabaw Island hog. "He sent us a pig. Then two pigs," Mr. Foster says of the courtship. "It was 'Let's feel this out.'"



Mike Yezzi with Gloucestershire Old Spots. PHOTO: MEGAN HALEY FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Finally, in May, the farmer agreed Mr. Foster was worthy of the four a week he wanted. The regular supply "has been a huge, huge weight off my mind," he says.

"People are taking a good hard look at their pork chops," says farmer Mike Yezzi, 49, whose Flying Pigs Farm supplies Mr. Foster, "and realizing there's no way to

cook this pork chop and not wind up without it being tough.”

More back fat is what discriminating pork lovers want, inches of it, along with redder meat. And thick, greasy bacon, and more supple lard in sausages. That's the attraction of meat from fatty “heritage” breeds that can be hard to come by.

Penn TenEyck, a restaurant owner in tony Dataw Island, S.C., two years ago wanted to add pork chops to his menu but says “99% of the time they are dry.”



Gloucestershire Old Spots piglet



Tamworth



Large Black boar



Ossabaw Island hog



Berkshire sows



Guinea hog

PHOTOS: JEANNETTE BERANGER/THE LIVESTOCK CONSERVANCY(6)

He found the breed of his desire—huge Tamworth hogs—at a farm an hour from Charleston. But “they had more chefs than hogs,” says Mr. TenEyck, 33. “To get in the doors was a little bit of a struggle.”

He persuaded another chef to put in a good word with the farmer, Marc Filion. Then he kept showing up at the local farmers market to chat up the farmer. After six months of Mr. TenEyck's wooing, Mr. Filion agreed to sell him a pig.

Mr. TenEyck's restaurant now trims the fat before serving \$25 pork chops, using the lard in chicken pâté. “You get that nuttiness, that creamy flavor,” he says. “The fat cap on these things is like an inch and a half.”

Mr. Filion, 61, began raising Tamworths—nicknamed “bacon pigs”—at the urging of a local chef. “What really surprised me was when we started getting calls from chefs that were not in Charleston,” he says. “These chefs were in Columbia, Atlanta, Charlotte.”

For millennia, farmers bred pigs to be fat, prized partly for the lard used for meals and lubricants. Then synthetic oils and competition from leaner meats had many American hog farmers avoiding the fattiest breeds.

By 2000, the number of stubby-legged Berkshire pigs registered in the National Swine Registry had dramatically declined. Some lardier hogs have gone extinct, says the Livestock Conservancy, a nonprofit that aims to conserve endangered farm-animal breeds.

The pork industry created a better-quality meat by breeding leaner hogs, says Steve Meyer, an economist who analyzes pork markets at Express Markets Inc., a Fort Wayne, Ind., research firm.

With the rise of low-carb high-protein diets, fatty bacon made a comeback. Elite chefs began to cook with oilier pork chops and sausages.

Fattier cuts are now consistently pricing above leaner cuts. Pork bellies, used to make bacon, are so popular their prices have risen around 80% this year.

Among breeds making a comeback are the compact-sized guinea hog, known for its generous back fat. In 1990, conservationists located just 50 guineas in the U.S., says the Livestock Conservancy. Over 3,000 have been registered since 2007.

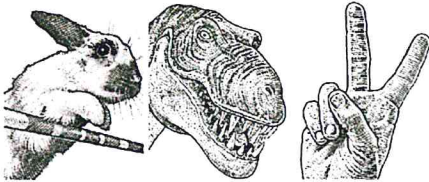
“Chefs started to discover that you could make some really good charcuterie with these little pigs,” says Jeannette Beranger, the conservancy's senior program manager.

Cathy Payne, 64, had never raised pigs when she decided to raise guinea hogs on her Elberton, Ga., farm. After months of research in 2013, she found a few in Mississippi and brought them back in two crates in her Toyota Prius.



Flying Pigs Farm pork is processed at Eagle Bridge Custom Meat and Smokehouse, Eagle Bridge, N.Y. PHOTOS: MEGAN HALEY FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL(2)

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Her pigs are now so sought-after she put an electric gate on her driveway to keep out would-be rustlers. She interviews prospective owners to make sure they are committed to proliferating the breed, saying: "I'm selective about who keeps them."

In Fort Collins, Colo., Harvey Blackburn, coordinator for the U.S. Agriculture Department's National Animal Germplasm Program, oversees a facility preserving the frozen semen, embryos, oocytes and ovaries of 1,500 different pigs. He says the expansion of farmers markets is creating a fatty-hog-semen revival.

One farmer, 48-year-old Gra' Moore of Carolina Heritage Farms in South Carolina—"The Hogfather"—to chefs—is working with USDA sperm to bring back the fatty American Spot pig. "The pork chops at the grocery store," he says, "taste like cardboard."

The rare floppy-eared Large Black and the outdoor-foraging Gloucestershire Old Spots are so desired in America that in 2015 a U.S. group imported semen from the U.K., says Professor and State Swine Breeding Specialist Tim Safranski at University of Missouri-Columbia, who helped with the project.



Heritage breed piglets at Mike Yezzi's Flying Pigs Farm. PHOTO: MEGAN HALEY FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The revival has inspired what hog experts call "bad actors," breeders who pass off skinny pigs as fatter types by crossing lardy and lean breeds. "People will take a pig you can basically find on Craigslist, cross it with a guinea hog and most people can't tell the difference," says Mr. Safranski.

Big companies are bellying up, including Perdue Farms Inc., whose Niman Ranch unit advertises heritage hogs. Niman expects its farmers to produce hogs with

twice the fat of typical commercially grown pigs, says Niman general manager Jeff Tripician.

“Cardiac doctors were against eating pork...So the pork industry responded to that by genetically beginning to produce leaner hogs,” says Bob Darrell, vice president of retail fresh-pork sales for Smithfield Foods Inc., a major U.S. pork producer that says it has been breeding fatter commercial pigs over the past decade.

“Now we’ve done a U-turn. We’re adding fat back into our hogs.”

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