



High on the Hog

Menuing boutique pork may cost a little more but will help you carve out your own niche of delicious pork.

BY KATIE AYOUB

If you're a chef searching for an old-fashioned, well-marbled pork chop, go to the Rodeo Drive of pork production. Boutique pork producers offer designer labels such as Berkshire, Korubota and Duroc—these are the Guccis of pork, with a taste that one chef describes as “wonderfully piggy.” Farmers are putting the fat back into these hogs while following the traditional principles of sound animal husbandry, good genetics and conscientious land stewardship.

The ethical reasons for menuing heirloom pork abound, but there also exist more practical benefits.

Consider the changing landscape of public sensibility. According to the Des Moines, Iowa-based National Pork Board (NPB), 40% to 80% of consumers are interested in organic and all-natural pork products.

Chefs are certainly interested. Indeed, the NPB recently launched a new Web site, www.nichepork.org, which runs a tagline, “Niche pork—the other opportunity.” The site provides information on where to source niche pork, as well as resources for farmers considering this style of pork producing. In 1998, the NPB conducted roundtable research with the American Culinary



Snake River Farms markets its American Korubota rack of pork as richer and more flavorful than traditional white pork.

smaller litters but yield a succulent product. Low-stress environment and a wider range of movement, along with soy and corn feeds, result in well-marbled, rich-flavored pork. Along with their product, these small pork producers, such as Niman Ranch, American Berkshire Association and Pipestone Family Farms hold great pride in their commitment to sustainable agriculture.

Their products are gaining momentum in foodservice. Chefs rave about juicy and delicious pork tenderloins and chops, despite a substantially higher price tag than conventional counterparts. Niche pork producers also offer the underutilized parts of the pig, such as pork jowls and pork bellies. These peasant cuts from designer pigs offer great flavor and variety in product.

Guan what?

Chefs are rendering guanciale, a dry-cured and seasoned pork, into sauces for a viscous, mouthfeel and also using it as an added-interest ingredient on menus.

Peter Chastain, chef/owner of Prima in Walnut Creek, Calif., uses guanciale in a variety of applications. “I use it as a protector—larding or barding a lean food with fat protects it from drying out during cooking,” he says. Described on the menu as a Sonoma rabbit stuffed with olives, wrapped with guanciale and roasted in the wood oven, he sources his guanciale from Oakland, Calif.-based Niman Ranch. He also uses it as an ingredient in pasta dishes and soups to “help bring the dishes up.” For instance, the Emilian meat sauce for a pasta dish at Prima is made with an Italian soffritto,

including wine, broth, milk, tomato and guanciale.

At One Market in San Francisco, chef/partner Adrian Hoffman recently featured a guanciale and clam pie on his season-focused menu. “People loved it. They didn’t know what it was, but it became a topic of conversation with the server. It had a piggy smokiness,” says Hoffman. For the pie, he blanched the guanciale, and then sweated it along with leeks, onions, garlic and butter. He added flour, white wine, clam juice from cherrystone clams, then milk and chopped cherrystone clams. Once it achieved the consistency of thick chowder, he placed the mixture in a gratin dish and topped it with diced cornbread, then baked it. “The guanciale gave it a great texture and added more flavor than bacon,” he says. He charged \$12.50 for the entrée and ran a food cost of \$3.75.

Belly up

Pork bellies from niche pork producers are thicker and fattier than commercial bellies, and provide for a more luxurious dish. At Craftsteak in the MGM Grand, Las Vegas, chef de cuisine Christopher Albrecht sources his boutique pork from Snake River Farms, Boise, Idaho. Snake River’s brand is American Korubota (Japanese black hog), which is 100% Berkshire pork. He menus a decadent 10-ounce portion served with a traditional Italian mostarda. He buys the pork bellies on the bone, sears and then braises them. Albrecht then simmers the bellies for six hours in a mirepoix with Madeira, pork stock, thyme, bay leaf and rosemary. They’re cooled in the liquid, then cut off the bone and portioned. He scores them and places them in the oven with a bit of the liquid. The bellies are slowly heated, with liquid



PHOTO BY SNAKE RIVER FARMS

Federation members. “The discovery was that we had gone too lean on our product. It lost flavor. So we’re trying to develop products that chefs want,” says Larry Cizek, NPB’s director of culinary and niche-market development. Despite this shift in demand, the wildly successful campaign heralding pork as “the other white meat” is not going away. “A significant portion of consumers are still looking for leaner products, but there is a niche market for fattier cuts,” he says.

These niche pork products are available from small farms and co-ops, which are raising breeds that take longer to raise and have

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spooned over them.

"It's a really rich, succulent dish. To sell it, my servers explain that it's fresh bacon, not cured or salted," says Albrecht. It's not a top seller, but the boutique pork belly holds its place on Craftsteak's menu. "I hope it broadens my customers' palates." It sells for \$29 and he reports a food cost of 26%.

Dan Barber, chef/owner of Blue Hill in New York, cures pork belly in-house, and then serves it with a grilled pork chop in a mustard/lemon/thyme broth and a side of braised romaine. He buys whole pigs from Skate Creek Farm, East Meredith, N.Y., which raises Berkshire pigs, and then Blue Hill fabricates them in-house.

Other pink meat

Back at One Market, Hoffman also menus Berkshire pork, which he gets from Preferred Meats in San Francisco, for his braised and glazed pork shoulder. He cuts the meat into 11-ounce chunks and keeps them in a brine with honey, espallete, rosemary, garlic, reduced chicken stock, sherry and sherry vinegar. The shoulder is then poached in sous-vide bags for eight hours, then stored. For service, the pork is reheated in a water bath, then served with a green onion faro with salt-pork butter. The dish sells for \$22.75 and runs a food cost of \$4.25.

Chef de cuisine Giancarla Bodoni

uses Niman Ranch pork at Miami Beach's Escopazzo. Her pork tenderloin is filled with smoked mozzarella and served with a Madeira/sage/amarene cherry sauce. "The tenderloin has more fat than commercial pork. The fat renders the meat juicier, but it's still a pretty lean cut," says Bodoni. She cuts an incision in the center of the tenderloin, trims the silver skin, but leaves the rest to melt in the pan. She then stuffs the pork with *scamorza*, a soft Italian mozzarella. She sears it, then finishes it in the oven, deglazing with Madeira, sage and a pork demi-glace.

How to get it

American Berkshire Association, West Lafayette, Ind., (765) 497-2959, www.americanberkshire.com.

Confederated Swine Producers (American Family Farms brand), Elkader, Iowa, (866) 277-7675

Niman Ranch Inc., Oakland, Calif., (866) 808-0340, www.nimanranch.com.

New England Livestock Alliance, Hardwick, Mass., (413) 477-6200, www.nelivestockalliance.org

National Pork Board's Niche Pork, www.nichepork.org offers a sourcing page.

Pipestone Family Farms, Pipestone, Minn., (866) 767-8875, www.pipestonefamilyfarms.com (for retail outlets and mail order)

Vermont Quality Meats, Andover, Vt., (802) 875-3159

Small farm focus

Delivering flavorful products is a priority with all chefs, but with the ones we spoke with about boutique pork, commitment to sustainable agriculture came in a very close second.

The first drive is taste, certainly, but right behind that is supporting small farmers who are trying to raise pork," says Barber from Blue Hill. "We are making choices that have long-term effects, not only on quality of food served but on the environment that surrounds us. The farmers produce not only goods but a landscape that is very much a part of our romantic and realistic view of the kind of world we want to live in," he says.

Chastain from Prima concurs. "Wherever possible, for the last 20 years I have chosen naturally raised or organically raised foods for health and sustainability concerns," says Chastain.

Of course, there's also the benefit of distinction. Menuing designer items—Early Girl tomatoes, rope-grown mussels, Pipestone Farms pork chops—upgrades a menu and brands the chef as unique. "Chefs are interested in branching out and consumers are interested in trying something different. There's a continuing awareness of ingredients," says Craftsteak's Albrecht. "More people are aware of food, and plain old pork chops gets boring. With niche pork, there's attention to detail from start to finish," he says.

"A lot of it is about taste, but an equally important thing to keep in mind is that the power of the spotlight I enjoy and the sheer purchasing power I control has effects, and those effects aren't benign. It would be easier to purchase through SYSCO, but I would be doing a great disservice to the landscape where I hope to retire," says Barber. □



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