

## **The Other Pork**

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By Sam Gugino

With fat and flavor back in style, gourmets are sure to go hog wild.

My plan was to visit a pig farm. But at Cabbage Hill Farm in Mount Kisco, N.Y., the verdant rolling pastures, serene lake and charming, whitewashed buildings made me feel as if I had come to a hog spa instead. This was not surprising, given that the farm's executive director, Annie Farrell, believes that the best pork comes from contented pigs. "The animals are not confined. They forage, the way pigs were meant to. We minimize stress, even in slaughtering, because stress adversely affects the meat," says Farrell, who supplies top restaurants such as Daniel and Blue Hill in New York. No argument here; Cabbage Hill pork is the best I've ever eaten.

Cabbage Hill and similar small pork producers, such as Niman Ranch, American Berkshire Association, Pipestone Family Farms and Confederated Swine Producers (whose pork is sold under the American Family Farms brand), are part of a growing movement. Though their practices vary somewhat—some allow animals to roam freely while others keep them in roomy pens, for instance—in general, their methods are old-fashioned and humane. Not every one is strictly free-range and organic, but all strive to keep things as natural as possible.

Other changes are taking place in the pork industry as well, as our mania for svelteness has caused mainstream pork producers to raise pigs that look more like Lara Flynn Boyle than Camryn Manheim. Who would have guessed a generation ago that today's pork tenderloin would have about the same fat and calories as does skinless chicken? The lean look got so out of hand that about five years ago many large pork producers began injecting meat with a sodium phosphate solution to keep it moist while being cooked.

But boutique producers have put that fat back. The result is the kind of taste that pork used to have. "I'd describe the flavor as 'exceedingly porky,' like the difference between really good chicken and supermarket ones," says Bruce Aidells, co-author (with Denis Kelly) of *The Complete Meat Cookbook*.

The pot roast of Pipestone pork shoulder with stewed garlic cloves, mashed Yukon gold potatoes and rutabaga served at the Dakota Bar & Grill in St. Paul, Minn., has "taken off like crazy," according to executive chef Ken Goff. Goff points to the darker pink color and superb marbling as two main reasons why he finds Pipestone superior to "commodity" pork. "The intense flavor is a little like wild boar," he says.

Pipestone, located in Pipestone, Minn., is a cooperative venture—banding together being a method small farmers use to compete with large producers. Participating farmers each use the same crossbreed of pigs (a combination of Yorkshire, Duroc, English Landrace and Hampshire) and have them slaughtered and packed at communal plants. These farmers agree to raise the animals in a similar fashion, and feed them with locally grown soy beans and corn free of growth hormones and antibiotics. On the East Coast, the New England Livestock Alliance is establishing a similar organization of farmers from New England and New York, a group which includes Cabbage Hill.

The American Berkshire Association (another cooperative) uses purebred Berkshire pigs exclusively. These black pigs go back almost four centuries to England, the motherland of many heirloom hog breeds, which include the Tamworths, Large Blacks and Gloucestershire Old Spots raised at Cabbage Hill.

Pork from Pipestone and American Berkshire Association has been so prized that, until recently, their entire production went to Japan, where they are as picky about pork as they are about seafood.

Not everyone is sold on small-farm (some have called it "designer") pork, however. Robert Rust of Rust Associates, a meat-industry consultant in Iowa, says that mass-produced pork injected with a sodium phosphate solution "stays juicy and ensures virtually fool-proof cooking." And despite the pig-factory knock, Rust says there is no scientific evidence that mass-produced pigs have problems. "Lack of movement makes little difference to them. Pigs in confinement are protected from weather and stress. And rations are carefully calculated for maximum nutrients," he says.

Farming practices aside, for most consumers the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Does an active, outdoor pig produce better meat? To find out, I tried pork from several small producers against Master Choice pork, an A&P brand produced on large farms and injected with a sodium phosphate. From each producer I tasted pan-fried loin chops and oven-roasted tenderloins and butt (shoulder) roasts.

Cabbage Hill's succulent chops were so staggeringly delicious that I dropped the fork after my first bite and tried to think when, if ever, I'd had pork this good. American Berkshire's sweet and sensuous chops were a pretty close second. American Family Farms chops placed third—terrific flavor, but a bit too chewy.

Pipestone's were extremely juicy but mild, almost bland. Niman's were reasonably juicy and flavorful but a little tough. Master Choice chops were comparable to all except Cabbage Hill's and American Berkshire's.

There was less difference among pork tenderloins. Still, Cabbage Hill's and Pipestone's came out on top, with American Berkshire's a solid third.

Cabbage Hill, Pipestone and American Berkshire ruled the butt roast roost. The Pipestone and Cabbage Hill roasts filled the house with soul-satisfying aromas as they cooked. Both had herb nuances, particularly of thyme. The Cabbage Hill also had a slightly gamy taste. Pipestone had that old-fashioned "porky" flavor. The thick, juicy slices from the American Berkshire pork looked and almost tasted like beef prime rib.

I found little difference between the roasts of Niman and Master Choice, which was pretty surprising given Niman's popularity with chefs and its high price—just over \$5 a pound compared with \$2.59 a pound for Master Choice's. The Niman tenderloin was \$16 a pound, four times what I paid for Master Choice's. Pipestone pork costs about 20 percent more than supermarket pork, Cabbage Hill's about 50 percent more.

For maximum juiciness, tenderness and flavor, I recommend cooking pork to an internal temperature of no more than 150° F; still plenty high enough to kill trichinosis (which, for all practical purposes, no longer occurs in commercially raised pork).

Because it straddles the line between light and dark meat, pork lends itself to a variety of wine pairings. My favorites were two German Rieslings. The rich and fruity sweetness of a Rheingau Spätlese complemented the meat wonderfully, and the crisp acidity of a Mosel Kabinett really sang with the pork. The floral qualities of Viognier and an Alsace Gewürztraminer also worked well. Among reds I liked Pinot Noir and a young Spanish Tempranillo.

Though small producers are improving distribution channels, their pork can be hard to come by. But be patient. These pigs are worth waiting for. Sam Gugino, Wine Spectator's Tastes columnist, is the author of *Low-Fat Cooking to Beat the Clock* (Chronicle Books).

### **How to Get It**

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

[www.americanberkshire.com](http://www.americanberkshire.com) (for retail outlets)

Cabbage Hill Farm, Mount Kisco, N.Y., (914) 241-2658 (for availability of its own pork and similarly produced pork); Confederated Swine Producers (American Family Farms brand), Elkader, Iowa, (866) 277-7675; Niman Ranch Inc., Oakland, Calif., (866) 808-0340, [www.nimanranch.com](http://www.nimanranch.com) (for retail outlets and mail order)

New England Livestock Alliance, Hardwick, Mass., (413) 477-6200, [www.nelivestockalliance.org](http://www.nelivestockalliance.org) (for retail outlets); Pipestone Family Farms, Pipestone, Minn., (866) 767-8875, [www.pipestonefamilyfarms.com](http://www.pipestonefamilyfarms.com) (for retail outlets and mail order)

Vermont Quality Meats, Andover, Vt., (802) 875-3159 (for whole pigs—cuts can be purchased from Frank's Butcher Shop, Chelsea Market, 75 Ninth Ave., New York, (212) 242-1234)