

A Yen For Pork

Family farmers learn to survive by tailoring their pigs to Japanese tastes

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The flight of the family farm was cause célèbre in the '80s, when Willie Nelson played at Farm Aid and Sam Shepherd starred in the film *Country*. But after the hubbub died down in the past decade, the situation actually grew worse. More than half of Iowa's pork producers went under in the '90s, with some 16,000 dropping out in the decade's last two years alone.

Dale and Lisa Siebrecht, now 42 and 41, feared they would join their fallen comrades. Although their two family lines boast seven generations of farmers, the marketplace did not care, paying out only 38¢ or 39¢ per lb. for pork that typically cost them 40¢ to produce. When you tour the land around their home near Curlew in north-western Iowa, the only farms you see are small, deserted ones or the gleaming corporate compounds that control about 90% of the U.S. market and can churn out bacon and baby backs far cheaper than the Siebrechts can.

The couple was about to give up when Lisa was tipped off about a survival strategy. Some family farmers were raising not the lean, hybrid pigs favored by the corporate operations but the big, slow-growing Berkshire hog – a breed first celebrated by Oliver Cromwell's army three centuries ago and currently prized by the Japanese, who like their pork cutlets fat and juicy.

The Siebrechts, figuring they had nothing to lose, signed on two years ago with Berkshire Gold, a consortium of about 100 independent family farmers who export pigs to Japan. While hybrid hogs play to the strengths of corporate growers like Smithfield and Seaboard – it's easy to raise lots of them fast – Berkshires require the family farmers' skill, passion and patience. The specialty hogs have smaller litters, take a month longer to fatten up and require more attention. In two years the Siebrechts have taken only one trip out of the state, content to steal a few hours at their lakeside trailer on summer weekends before returning each night to check on their animals.

The payoff is in the pork – and the profits. Berkshires have finer muscle fibers, which retain more moisture for cooking and more flavor for eating. When Iowa State University a few years ago tested thousands of pigs for 25 criteria of pork quality, Berkshires finished first in 24 categories.

That did not help the Berkshire growers much in the U.S., but it did in Japan, where deliciousness still trumps dieting. That's what keeps the Siebrechts in business – along with the reduction of trade barriers and the advent of CryoVac packaging, which gives importers up to 90 days to transport and sell their product without freezing it. Today there's a trail of Japanese importers traveling across Iowa to see the pigs, meet the farm families and take pictures of their towheaded children. Residents of Floyd, George and Estherville, Iowa, now know more Japanese phrases and customs than do most New Yorkers.

The Berkshire growers are now working to crack the U.S. market. "Our philosophy was to sell it to the chefs first, then the individual consumers," says Kelly Biensen, who formed Eden Farms, the domestic equivalent of Berkshire Gold, to sell exclusively to American restaurants and online at earlyautumnfarms.com. "When I told them it all comes from small family farms, they said, 'We'll try it.' That's what got us into these very white-tablecloth restaurants, but the quality's what's kept us there." Still, only about 5% of Berkshire pork is sold in the U.S., with the rest going to Japan.

Once you try it, you will understand why Berkshire pork sells for 60¢ per lb. wholesale – about 50% more than factory-grown skinny pigs – and about \$9 for a jumbo pork chop online. It's the Ben & Jerry's of pork: socially conscientious and sinfully delicious.

Berkshire pork has not put the Siebrechts on easy street, but it has allowed them to continue doing what they love. "Dale and I have been truly blessed," Lisa says. "We're trying to find a niche. It's our only hope. This is one area where we can beat the big boys."