

Pork lift

With chefs such as Wolfgang Puck and Emeril Lagasse raving about the flavor of Berkshire pork, demand for the pricey but toothsome red meat is expected to grow in the domestic market. At least, two companies are betting it will. Snake River Farms, which had a hit with Wagyu “American Kobe” beef, is moving into the premium pork market.

Two Iowa producers, Pro Pork and SiouxPreme have joined forces to concentrate on raising and processing Berkshire hogs and then marketing the meat through the new brand name Berkridge. At prices in the \$10 per pound range, and with limited supplies available (since much of the meat is exported to Japan, where it is prized as “kurobuta” pork), Berkridge pork won’t become a mass market staple anytime soon. But like Snake River, Berkridge plans to market to the upscale hospitality industry, then introduce the product at retail once diners are educated about the superior flavor and texture. As Puck put it, “Once you eat this, it’s hard to eat any other pork.”

Troy Arens, director of sales and marketing for Berkridge, notes that Berkshire hogs, which are descended from a venerable British line, virtually disappeared in the United States because they are so difficult to raise. “They have smaller litters, and they don’t put on weight very well,” he says. “They put on fat, not muscle. But it’s that fat that gives them the flavor and texture.”

Why the sudden comeback? Arens says that both Pro Pork and SiouxPreme have been involved in the Berkshire market for over a decade, but almost strictly for export. Now, American tastes are changing, and people are willing to pay more for a great eating experience. “People attach themselves to a story,” he says, “and if you can deliver a clearly better product, price becomes less important.” At roughly \$10 a pound at retail, Berkshire pork is still significantly less expensive than prime beef, he notes.

Berkridge is concentrating on building its network of smaller family farms to ramp up production and produce a reliable, consistent supply of Berkshire pork. “Consistency is the main thing we bring to the table,” Arens says. “All of our hogs are fed the same ration, corn and soy, and we can predict six months out what the supply will be.” Berkridge is relying on word of mouth, so to speak, to build demand at retail, which is still a premium-pork market in its infancy.

