

WHAT EVERY DAIRYMAN NEEDS TO KNOW ABOUT WHEY-FED PIGS

Think about it, there are really only three foods that incite temporary insanity and exquisite joy in the human condition, rotten grapes, moldy milk, and ripened meat! These are, of course, better known as wine, cheese and real ham! Famous chef Harold McGee in his classic *On Food and Cooking* first explained this attraction explaining that it is these artisanal foods that “make our lives much more interesting”. Oh, yes.

A man walks into a bar (this is not a joke) and is served exactly 100 grams (about 3.5 oz) of sliced ham. The meat is sliced so thinly it is translucent and is arranged on a 9 inch dinner plate so that it looks like the delicate petals of a flower. The man slowly eats the meat, savoring each bite and swooning. For this privilege he pays over \$100 and walks out very, very happy. So, where is he? Hint: not in America (yet!). No, is most likely in Spain, Italy or even jolly old England. In these countries, the art of dry curing “country” hams has developed into a skill approaching a zen experience. Likewise, thousands of locals and foodie pilgrims have been flocking to these well-known meat shrines and charcuteries ever since man began salting and curing meat.

The most famous hams in the world are the Serrano hams, most notably the Iberico black hog hams, all of which are created in the oak savannas of Spain where ground-fall acorns stand several inches deep luring in these free-ranging forest hogs. The nearly-as-famous Jambon de Bayonne is a “French cousin” ham. No Iberico ham can be sold before 22 months of careful aging has transpired. One leg from the top-quality Iberico black-toed pigs can sell for --hold on to your hat-- \$4000 per leg! During the nightmarish Spanish Inquisition, suspects were asked to dine on ham that was put before them. To refuse could be indication of being either Muslim or Jewish, a fatal mistake! To throw off the thuggish Inquisitors smart Jews learned to hang cured hams in their windows and make a point of eating lots of good ham.

The equally famous Parma ham, aka Prosciutto di Parma, comes from the region of Northern Italy where Parmigiano Reggiano cheese is created and the pigs can wrap their lips around the rich cheese whey, the source of the slightly-sweet, slightly-nutty flavor of this famous meat. The integrity of these unique and superb meats is somewhat guaranteed by the PDO, “Protected Designation of Origin” regulations which stipulate conditions of rearing, breeding, processing and serving. Just like “Cuban” cigars, fakes abound. For this reason the Iberico hams must have the black toes and a special ribbon attached.

Americans once had our own European-based tradition of curing, drying, and smoking delicious hams but that has fallen under the wheels of progress, efficiency and the bottom-liners of industry. Believe it or not, there once was a real peanut-fed, 12 month-aged ham bearing the Smithfield label but that was once upon a time, long ago before they became the CAFO (confinement animal feeding operation) barons, one factory of Smithfield themselves that allegedly has given rise to the mutant virus known as our latest outbreak of H1N1 Swine Flu virus....thanks Smithfield. Today, the sanctity of American pork resides with the deservedly-famous Colonel Bill Newsom’s country hams

out of Princeton, Kentucky, makers of a truly dry-aged and naturally-cured delicious ham. Truth be told, thousands of small upstart charcuteries and cutting edge restaurants are beginning to rediscover “the lost flavor of quality pork”. It’s time to abandon the planet-destroying factory hog farms, time to get away from the deathly-boring “other white meat”.

More pork is eaten around the world than any other kind of meat. Among western peoples, it was our pig-loving Greco-Roman ancestors who perfected the fine art of salting and curing meat. The sheep, goat and cattle rearing Middle Easterners never developed this art. As Peter Kaminsky states in his must-read book *Pig Perfect*, the Egyptians developed the art of preserving mummies but never got around to utilizing the same technology to make a good ham! What a waste. Of course, in those days salting and curing had more to do with extending the storage life of foods from times of plenty long into the lean times, than it did with creating a gourmet eating experience.

The quality, flavor and healthfulness of pork fat, lard that is, has more to do with the diet and lifestyle of the pig than anything else, a fact much more so true for hogs than it is with tallow from a ruminant animal. When ruminants are fed whey, peanuts, acorns or other fats, the fat content of the ration is actually digested “twice” thanks to the rumen bugs. Therefore less direct flavor from the dietary fats comes through. The rumination process also hydrogenates the fat so that it becomes more of a hard fat like butter. Soft, or unsaturated fat creates more flavor, more mouth feel and gives us the rainbow of scents and flavors with the aging of meat.

This is one of many reasons why we don’t want to eat “garbage hogs”. These are the factory farm hogs fed and fattened on such commercial waste streams as bakery waste. In fact, consuming this kind of factory pork is a great way to mainline huge quantities of trans fats into one’s diet. Trans fats, a dietary death trip are more deadly than cigarettes and they come straight across your plate all the way from the hog trough. If you have a true death wish, just go eat the Dunkin’ Donuts yourself and get your trans fats direct, not second-hand from a pig.

To make juicy pork chops and the ultimate ham we need soft fat. Soft fat comes primarily from a ration that includes a substantial quantity of quality cheese whey, skim milk or other dairy products, as well as a pleasing quantity of peanuts, tree nuts such as acorns, almonds, pecans, or even walnuts (ever hear a woods pig cracking walnut hulls with their teeth? Yikes, they can do it!). Most people don’t know this but good lard is a health food! Good free-range pastured pork is usually around 55% monounsaturated fat (the good stuff), primarily oleic acid with nice levels of linoleic acid, especially if the hogs have access to acorns as part of their diet, acorns having about 62% oleic acid and plenty of linoleic acid. These monounsaturated fats lower LDL cholesterol and raise HDL cholesterol, and that’s good. In addition to whey or nuts and seeds, hogs need a “balanced diet” which should include plenty of grass, alfalfa and other weeds or forbs. These greens supply plenty of antioxidants which protect the fat from rancidity and oxidation during storage, curing and processing. Another excellent seed to incorporate into hog rations is ground flax seed or flax seed hulls that have had the flax oil

extracted. By incorporating up to 400# of hulls per ton of concentrated feed the resultant hog fat can have as much of the very desirable omega 3 fat as a wild salmon or a streak from a 100% grass-fed ruminant. To this we complete the ration using a high mineral pre-mix to insure adequate minerals especially the protective minerals such as zinc, cobalt, manganese, selenium, iodine, copper and molybdenum. To my knowledge, Jerry Brunetti makes the ultimate full and complete hog ration pre-mix. It's possible, and desirable, to promote pork raised in this manner as "high omega 3 fat" and "selenium enriched" pork, It's the truth and many consumers are seeking it.

Modern commodity hogs have an average of 42% less body fat than similar hogs did even back in the 1980's. While the short-sighted producers and politically-correct diet dictocrats, as lipid-lover Sally Fallon calls them, brag about this sad fact, we bemoan it and have thus returned to raising and fattening the heritage breeds that haven't been engineered to resemble greyhounds. For the most part we want black hogs because this is where we find the good red meat and the good fat. White hogs, which suffice for the every-day Serrano hams, are more known for maternal instincts and fertility than for tasty eating. We love our lard, we love juicy pork chops and we grow our hogs big and fat. We rarely harvest hogs before 300# body weight even going up to 400# in some cases. To achieve finish, we want to see some visible rolls of body fat. This pays off in big time benefits in flavor, quality, and even healthfulness. Without question, hogs, like any other animal, develop flavor as they age.

Pork fat harvested from these hogs should ideally be rendered with low-temperature heat and strained away from the cracklings, which can also be marketed for sale. It's wise to avoid commercial lard unless one knows how it was rendered, some of the high temperature extractions end up creating toxic trans fats or worse. The snow-white internal kidney fat should be harvested and sold as a special fat to be used for cooking, baking or gourmet restaurant use, and the "caul" or mesenteric membranes, which are laced with good white fat,, can also be sold to restaurants or chefs. All cooks should avoid cooking food, especially at fry temperatures, in any of the common vegetable oils, which include canola, soy, corn or even olive oil. Olive oil is good for you with lots of unsaturated fats but it should never be heated lest it break down into toxic trans fats. Most of the common cooking oils are of GMO origin anyway so that's another good reason to avoid them. Butter tastes good as a cooking oil but is extremely fragile and shouldn't really be heated above 150 degrees. Frying or high-temperature cooking is only safe with lard, tallow, or some of the virgin tropical oils such as coconut or palm oil. McDonald's really began killing people when they were forced, for PC reasons to convert the french fries from tallow-cooked to vegetable oil-cooked. They also lost so much flavor in doing so that more artificial flavorings had to be added. Eventually, all cooking oils will break down with repeated heating and it should be consigned to the bin for recycling as diesel fuel substitute.

We know that farm chickens are a more efficient source of protein than pigs. They also give us eggs. In the old days before modern meat preservation the chicken was a handy-dandy meal sized unit. Unlike tempermental sows, I don't think any farm children have ever been pecked to death by a rooster so that's another point for the birds. There

is, however, no reason why we can't have both chickens and hogs. Hogs can also wander through forest land, virtually impervious to predators and grow fat and delicious on land that is otherwise fairly unfarmable. It's also desirable to reclaim brushy, shrubby land using hogs to landscape.

When we are talking dairy farm, one can almost watch the whey turn to delicious, juicy pork. A recent medical study of nurses confirmed a fact that seems odd, but yet in reality scientifically true, that is low-fat milk, especially skim, makes you fat! Yes, it's true, once the good butterfat has been removed we have in essence sugar water, a known fattening agent. And yet, good whey retains the protein, amino acids and other nutrients of milk. For this reason, weight lifters and body-builders pay small fortunes for their whey supplements. A reality is that many dairy farms have to pay to have their excess whey hauled away! It's time to return to the fully bio-diverse slow-food farm!

References:

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