

GOOD FLAVOR

is their heritage

Virginia farmers are using free-range methods and heritage-breed hogs to create world-class terroir products.

by ERIC J. WALLACE | photography by TODD WRIGHT

C lay Trainum stands with palms on hips, pondering a 350-pound Berkabaw sow. The pig, lying on her side in a shaded bed of pine needles, had just given birth to 10 newborn piglets, all of whom were jostling for position along her belly. “We let the mama pigs nest where they like,” says 58-year-old Trainum with a sigh. He and his wife, Linda, own and operate Autumn Olive Farms with the help of their two adult sons. The family raises upward of 1,500 heritage-breed swine a year on about 500 acres near Waynesboro.

With bristly black fur, brawny legs, huge hooves and a long white snout, the new mother looks more like a wild beast than she does some fantastical creation of E.B. White. But when she gazes at us, seemingly grinning, there seems to be an intelligence that understands the beauty of the spot she has chosen – a cool, wooded bed with 180-degree eastward views of nearby Shenandoah National Park.

The tableau offers a stark contrast to corporate hog farms. There, pigs are kept indoors in cramped, concrete-floored pens, glimpsing

sunlight only through windows, never foraging in fields or forests. Antibiotics counter weakened immune systems. Genetic tampering and high-protein feeds expedite maturation.

Heritage-breed pigs, on the other hand, typically feed on seasonal fodder crops like beans, squash, corn, oats, and pumpkins. When possible, they root for nuts and fruit in the forest. It is a different way of raising hogs that you can literally taste.

Autumn Olive is one of 800 or so Virginia farms that specialize in raising heritage-breed pigs sustainably and humanely. The results have high-end chefs and butchers raving: They say methods like those used by the Trainum’s bring terroir meats that, in terms of flavor, rival the best of the Iberian Peninsula.

But it isn’t easy. Take, for example, birthing piglets. Depending on timing, and need, Autumn Olive has between 10 and 50 acres dedicated to its free-range maternity ward, lined with 35 to 40 lean-tos and cozy straw beds. Still, the Berkabaws sometimes prefer to give birth in the woods.

The breed is a cross between Berkshire and Ossabaw Island hogs,



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the latter of which evolved in the wild from hogs loosed by 16th century Spanish explorers on a Georgia barrier island. So, sometimes sows disappear into the forest, nesting under stone outcroppings, fallen trees, or in hollowed out stumps. Locating and monitoring them is work, but the labor is worth it.

“Clay’s pork is the best I’ve tasted, anywhere, ever,” says Ian Boden, the two-time James Beard Foundation semifinalist who runs The Shack restaurant in Staunton.

To meet demand, the Trainums process about 30 hogs a week. They sell cuts directly through an online store, as well as to specialty meat shops and fine-dining restaurants throughout Virginia and Washington D.C. Star clients include chefs like Boden, Patrick O’Connell of The Inn at Little Washington and Matthew Bousquet, executive chef at Charlottesville’s 1799.

“The key to great meat is pretty simple, at least in theory,” Trainium says. “You put these heritage breed animals in an ideal setting and let them do what nature intended.”

Boden says the success of farmers like Trainium and his famous precursor, Joel Salatin of Polyface, has inspired a heritage-breed renaissance. Top producers in the Virginia mountains are establishing terroir products on par with those of Old World ham havens like Spain and Italy. In turn, growing demand has given rise to artisan abattoirs, butcheries and meat shops.

“Over the past 15 years or so, a booming niche industry has sprung up around heritage breed pork products,” says Mark Estienne, the Virginia Tech professor who oversees swine research at the university’s Tidewater Agricultural Research and Extension Center. “Right now, there are about 1,000 hog farms in Virginia and the vast majority are small-scale producers doing heritage breed pigs.”

Most heirloom farms are smaller than 10 acres and split their sales between restaurants, boutique grocers, farmer’s markets and onsite stores. Nearly all rely on specialty abattoirs and butcheries to process meats. “It’s incredible given the fact that, just 30 years ago, many



of these breeds had all but disappeared,” Estienne says.

For more than 200 years, commercial farmers throughout the Southeast raised heritage pigs. Back then, names like Choctaw, Meishan, Guinea Hog, Red Wattle, Berkshire and Mulefoot were the norm. Each brought different characteristics and thrived in free-range settings.

“When I was a teenager growing up in Mississippi, my grandfather owned a farm and restaurant, and was constantly experimenting with breeds to see which ones tasted the best for which application,” says

Farmers like Clay Trainium, above, have inspired a heritage-breed renaissance establishing terroir products on par with those of Old World ham havens like Spain and Italy.



Linda Trainium helps the family raise upward of 1,500 heritage-breed swine a year on about 500 acres near Waynesboro.

Sydney Meers, 68. “He let ‘em roam through the woods, planted pumpkins and beans for ‘em to forage on – and that wasn’t anything special; it’s just how you did things back then.”

Meers, a pioneering Tidewater chef and James Beard finalist, says foraging and exercise led to healthy, robust animals with darker musculature and richer marbling. It also helped the animals resist diseases, which reduced the need for antibiotics. “The loins were leaner and had a texture more like a steak,” says Meers. “And the taste was just flippin’ fan-tas-tic!”

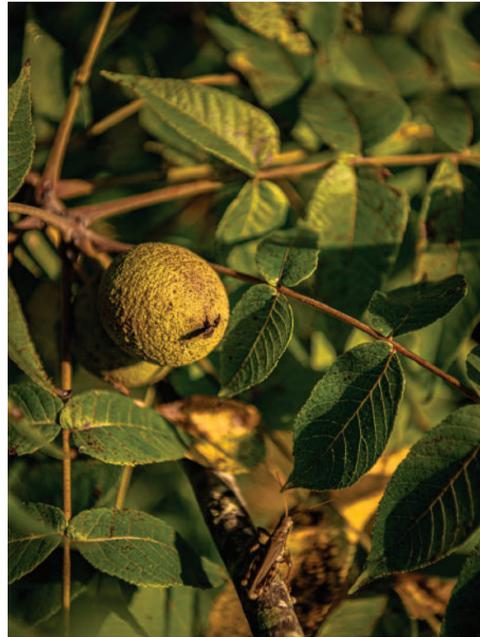
But by the time Meers opened his first place in Norfolk in 1989, sourcing local, free-range heritage pork was next to impossible. Factory farming had become the norm. Estienne says the shift toward corporate farming models began in earnest around 1980. Conglomeration cut Virginia swine farms from about 4,000 to less than 300 in just 10 years. To maximize production, pigs were raised in massive



numbers in cramped indoor confinement pens. High-protein feeds sped their growth. Antibiotics curbed sickness.

“Heritage pigs perform very poorly in such conditions,” Estienne says. So, companies replaced the troublesome breed with hybrids that matured quicker and were more docile. By 2000, many heritage breeds were threatened or endangered.

This forced discerning chefs to search for substitutes. Meers hunted down old-time farmers in North Carolina who had refused to change with the times.



Food sources found on the farm, including corn and black walnuts, play a role in the taste of the pork raised there.



Most of them were raising pigs for sustenance, or to be shared among friends and family alone. Striking a deal was frustrating and time-consuming. “But it was that or be stuck with that flavorless garbage they sell in grocery stores, so you did what you had to do.”

The farm-to-table food movements of the mid-2000s brought change. Exposés like Michael Pollan’s 2006 best-seller, *Omnivore’s Dilemma*, revealed the cruelty of factory farming models and the environmental devastation wreaked by monocultures. Works like Barbara Kingsolver’s 2007 *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, argued the superior tastes of heirloom produce and free-range livestock. Demand for humane and ecologically sustainable foods surged. Farms and farmer’s markets proliferated.

Still, for early meat producers and sellers, it was tough going.

“Those first years were extremely hard,” says Tanya Cauthen, 51, chef-owner of Richmond’s Belmont

Butchery. Launched in 2005, the gourmet farm-to-table shop was among the first of its kind in the South. “It was hard to find farmers that could consistently fill orders. And attracting regular customers required a tremendous amount of educational marketing.”

Most people were clueless about heritage breed meats. They balked at higher price-tags and questioned the dark, unfamiliar looking cuts. And charcuterie? Customers stared at Cauthen’s display like deer in headlights. Few knew what to make of options like speck, serrano, Tasso, pate Maison, rigatino, pork rilette, jambon blanc, guanciale, and so on.

She says superior-tasting pork products depend largely on husbandry practices. But genetics play an important role too. Among heritage breeds, centuries of adaptation and selective breeding have produced distinct muscle development and fat-storing characteristics that vary by breed. The result is a cornucopia of flavors, textures and taste sensations.

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Tanya Cauthen chef-owner of Richmond’s Belmont Butchery. Berkshire cuts that have a “nearly perfect” meat-to-fat ratio.

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butcher’s perspective, is nearly perfect,” Cauthen says. “You get superlative dark-red cuts with hard white fat and exquisite marbling. The carcass sort of sets the standard for what’s ideal.”

Ossabaw Island hogs, on the other hand, weigh less than 300 pounds at maturity and their fat is prized by chefs and charcuterie makers.

Meanwhile, hogs raised on farms like the Trainums’ develop what Cauthen describes as an ultra-woody, deliciously nutty hard fat. “It has a unique texture and very low melting point,” says Cauthen. “You get this

incredibly sumptuous and velvety mouthfeel, which makes for interesting charcuterie blends.”

Meers, who plans to serve heritage breeds at his Norfolk restaurant, Syd’s FishPig Café, when it opens this fall says it’s gotten easier to source heritage breed pork and that offering it is now a selling point for menus. “The meat is so flippin good, you can cook it up and eat it plain,” he says. “And you’ll swear the stuff has been seasoned. It just rocks your world.”

For her part, Cauthen sells out of related products each week and has more than doubled charcuterie offerings since 2005. And other artisan butcheries are following her lead: J.M. Stock Provisions opened in Charlottesville in 2013; Norfolk’s Pendulum Fine Meats, in 2014.

“The difference between now and even 3 years ago is crazy,” Meers says. “The eaters are onboard with this thing. And that’s given (farmers, butchers and chefs) the confidence to push the envelope.” ■