

RASKINAROUND

The return of chestnut ham

When Glenn Roberts of Anson Mills and David Shields of the University of South Carolina started scheming about how to reforest the Southeast with American chestnut trees, their interest wasn't limited to bowlfuls of roasted nuts at Christmastime. They envisioned resurrecting a wide spectrum of chestnut-based cuisine, including chestnut grits, chestnuts souffles and chestnut-fed meats.

The culinary revivalists weren't certain if a hog who spent his life feasting on chestnuts would taste better than a hog whose diet was chestnut-free. But an October 2013 barbecue — featuring a feral razorback that Roberts covertly caged into 150 acres surrounding an untended

grove of hybrid trees in northern Florida — suggested chestnuts could produce rich, nutty pork. Charcuterie made from the other pig in the pen cinched it.

Craig Deihl, the Cypress and Artisan Meat Share chef who's recognized as one of the nation's top meat curers, last week unveiled salami and ham made from the chestnut-fed hog he received. "We're getting pretty good at doing funky, different stuff," Deihl says.

Because the pig was trapped in the wild, it's not legal to sell the charcuterie. But Deihl plans to offer samples this weekend at the James Beard House in New York, where he's participating in a "Craft of Charcuterie" event alongside chefs including Dallas' John Tesar, Denver's Justin Bruson and



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Boston's Joshua Smith.

Rather than obscure the pork's flavor with seasonings, Deihl used only salt and pepper to cure the 40 pounds of meat he butchered from the razorback. The hams weighed about six pounds apiece; everything else was allotted for salami, mixed at a ratio of 60 percent meat to 40 percent fat.

"It's super fatty," says Deihl, who didn't want to stint on his first chestnut-fed pig. The thick bands of intramuscular

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fat slowed down the drying process, he adds: "I'd go by all the time and give it a squeeze. I wasn't going to rush the quality of it, and I'm glad I didn't."

After 15 months, Deihl deemed the charcuterie ready for sharing.

While the salami has a waxy, rosy richness that conveys luxury as eloquently as history, it's the greatness of the ham that will loom over every charcuterie board in my future. Sliced thinly, the ham has a well-oiled nuttiness that's slightly reminiscent of macadamias.

"It really is special," Deihl says of the exceptionally satiny charcuterie.

Or, as Roberts describes it: "A once-in-a-lifetime American treat in the pure Italian-Native American tradition."



DAVID SHIELDS

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