



Going Whole Hog

Nose-to-tail butchering is the new old trend in meat.

By Scott Morris

★ The organic food movement and its country cousin the local food movement are by now firmly rooted in American food culture. Organic and local produce abounds in major chain grocery stores and in better restaurants across the nation. While these movements have yielded tasty results, sometimes they get a little out of hand. You can be in, say, a trendy Manhattan foodie spot and the fresh squash from upstate New York fails to impress certain diners because it isn't local enough. And even if it were local enough, some patrons wouldn't order it without first asking for the particular farmer's name, along with his astrological sign and a list of the books currently on his nightstand.

Jokes aside, the success of these movements rests on serious principles. Local and organic

produce, advocates say, is more healthful and tasty and also benefits the local economy and environment. This is food that's grown, harvested, and prepared with great care. By the time an heirloom tomato gets to your table, it's bursting with love.

To which carnivores have something to say: What about the bacon?

Well, get ready. A burgeoning local, organic, artisan, and utterly mouth-watering meat movement is gaining ground. Butcher shops, once the only source for fresh meat, are making a comeback. Local cattle and pig farmers are becoming less lonely, and chickens are flying the coop and going free-range.

Craig Deihl, executive chef at Cypress in Charleston, South Carolina, and two-time nominee for the

Below: Craig Deihl, Cypress executive chef



prestigious James Beard Award, has been a pioneer. He started getting acquainted with local cattle and pork farmers eight years ago.

"I guess it started because I wanted to offer a better steak, and that meant I had to do my own butchering," he says. "You can't buy whole animals from large, national suppliers. So I went out and found local farmers to get an entire cow or pig."

He got a lot more than a better steak. One good thing naturally led to more benefits. He told me that once you start buying a whole animal, you realize you don't want to use only half of it. It's wasteful, and it's not cost-effective. This led Deihl back to his roots in rural Pennsylvania, where he used to spend time on his aunt and uncle's farm.

"They didn't kill an animal and throw most of it away," he says. "They used every part of it."

Deihl is pursuing the forgotten traditions regarding what we eat, what recipes we use, and how meat is prepared. For him, using organic and local meat is only one part of the process. And what he's most proud of is going whole hog.

When you go that route, the menu expands. Because you don't want to throw away good cuts, you're going to roll out charcuterie plates and novel recipes. And yes, there will be more meat manna, also known as pork fat.

"Obviously, pork fat tastes great," Deihl says. "But what most people don't realize is that it's better for you. You take pasteurized pork fat and put it against high-quality butter and it's better for you. If I'm frying in lard from heritage pigs, it's healthier than frying in canola oil. They knew this a hundred years ago. Why make Crisco, a vegetable shortening, when we have these lards? Now we find out modified fats are more dangerous than lards."

I'm on board with the pork fat, but I had never heard of heritage pigs. Local farmers have introduced Deihl to

THESE PIGS PROVIDE A BETTER PORK CHOP AND BETTER LARD FOR BISCUITS. BETTER SALAMIS, PROSCIUTTO, YOU NAME IT.

—Craig Deihl, executive chef at Cypress



is passionate about using the whole animal and buying from local farmers for better taste, health, and prices. He also stresses the morality of the practice, which is intimately connected to the other benefits.

"Originally I started reading books by Joel Salatin and seeing movies like *Food, Inc.*, and that got me interested in what I'm putting into my body and where it came from," Peisker says. "And that led me to whole-animal, nose-to-tail butchering."

Peisker outlines the benefits of his farming morality. "You can actually taste how the animal is treated," he states. "A lot of industrial meat is fed corn its entire life. You can taste that. Its nutritional content reflects that." He counts the ways. Free-range chickens eat grass and bugs as well as corn, giving them higher nutritional quality. Ditto for cows that are fed grass and grain. "Omega-3s will be almost three times higher in grass-fed beef," Peisker says. "Antioxidants will be much higher too." Add to that the fact that local farmers are better caretakers of cattle and pigs because they have less of them and can't play the big-volume odds. On Peisker's farm, every animal gets individual attention.

What's more, Peisker argues that the large scale of industrial farms forces meat producers to pack as many animals

unique breeding lines.

"These pigs provide a better pork chop and better lard for biscuits. Better salamis, prosciutto, you name it," he says. "I use Tamworth pigs and American black guinea hogs from South Carolina. The Ossabaw Island hog is from Ossabaw Island in Georgia. I use Red Wattle hogs. Mulefoots. Each of these has its own flavor profile." Not only does each one lend itself to new delicacies, each one comes with whopping amounts of Deihl's tender loving care, from pen to plate.

TLC is something James Peisker is also quick to champion. Peisker, along with Chris Carter, opened Porter Road Butcher in Nashville in 2012. In that same year Porter Road was named one of the nation's top five new artisanal butcher shops by *Bon Appétit*. Peisker

into as small a space as possible. To ward off the diseases such conditions foster, they have to use antibiotics. To drive up efficiency, they rely on hormones to grow their animals as fast as possible. "You can see the changes in the bodies of young people because of hormones and antibiotics [from the meat they eat]," he says.

For both Deihl and Peisker, taking better care of animals means taking better care of ourselves. "It tastes better. It promotes the local economy. It's healthier," Peisker says.

"And not only that, it's cheaper," he continues. "Customers come in asking for a rib eye, because that's all they know. I tell them about chuck eye, which is equivalent to a rib eye but has more flavor and is half as expensive. I introduce them to teres major, a really tender cut from the shoulder that's just as good as tenderloin but half the price."

Deihl also works to educate his customers. He offers what he calls a "Charcuterie for Dummies" menu that explains the source and preparation of every cut of meat. He also started Artisanal Meat Share, where customers who pay a monthly fee get cuts of hand-butchered, locally sourced meat each week, along with suggestions for various preparation techniques and recipes.

"The artisanal butchering, whole-animal movement is going to keep growing," Deihl contends. "You're going to see more artisanal butcher shops. More chefs are going to have to go whole animal in order to compete. And when you look at cost effectiveness, that means more chefs are going to start opening their own butcher shops. There will be more choice. It's going to bring integrity."

It's going to make your mouth water, too. 🍷

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