

Craig Deihl just got a new mission: raising porcine awareness. He's always been into artisanal charcuterie, evidenced by the sold-out Artisan Meat Share program he created at Cypress.

So it was natural for the Slow Food organization to approach him about their efforts to preserve a little-known breed of hog, originally a popular mainstay of the rural Carolina farmstead — one that traces its lineage in a manner similar to the human inhabitants of our region.

The American Guinea hog, a rare, heritage animal, is an amalgamated breed originating from crosses between native West African varieties and English stock. Like our Lowcountry culture, the pigs represent the creolization of West African and European influences into a distinctive, regional animal. Originally raised on small farms and homesteads, they became popular for their ease of care and diminutive size, almost half the dressed weight of a standard industrial hog from a modern concentrated animal feeding operation (CAFO).

According to Deihl, that's the least of the differences between these types of pigs and what you'll find under plastic in the grocery store. The Guinea hog, in particular, possesses certain traits that promise to make it a culinary gem, and the hogs that Deihl has been sourcing from Gray Moore's farm near Florence have proven to be extraordinary.

"It's a lard pig," Deihl explains. "The whole carcass only weighs about 80 pounds, about the size of a lamb. The chops are the size of an average lamb chop."

He has pictures on his blog of the first pig they butchered. Covered in a thick layer of fat, the meat has a deep red color, and tremendous amounts of intramuscular fat that deliver superior flavor. These traits, undesirable in commercial production, led to the decline of the many varieties of American Guinea hog. By the 1980s, the "yard pig" as it is sometimes affectionately called was all but wiped out.

The return of local, homestead agriculture may change that. When combined with the considerable interest already evident in local chef's charcuterie operations, such animals could see a high demand.

"These are super-premium animals raised in the woods on acorns and hay ... that gives them a very distinctive flavor," Deihl adds.

They are also easy for restaurants to handle. "A restaurant doesn't need special equipment to deal with these. Because they are so small, they can be broken down with a cleaver."

The inclusion of the Guinea hog into Slow Food's efforts has culminated in a dinner to raise awareness about these rare animals. On Tues. Feb. 23, the organization will convene at Cypress for a \$150-per-person celebration with Deihl delivering creative dishes surrounding the premium pork. Billed as a "reintroduction of the Guinea hog," the event promises to be delicious as well as informative. It has even attracted the attendance of Slow Food's figurehead, Carlo Petrini.

Deihl sees a bright future for the use of the hog.

"It's fatter than a Tamworth or Ossabaw hog," he explains, which means that once the word gets out, these things may be exceedingly hard to find — at least for awhile. The hope is that increased attention will spur a renaissance of sorts for the Guinea hog, encouraging more local producers to begin growing them. At only 130 pounds full grown, they make ideal animals for smaller farms, where they are often used to root, till, and fertilize soil simultaneously. They will eat rodent pests, and can forage in wooded areas for their own food. And at the end of the day, we bet they make some pretty tasty BLT's as well.



Gray Moore raises Guinea hogs at Carolina heritage farm in Pamplico