



VICTUALS

Pork belly futures looking more tasty

Old-fashioned farms luxuriate in fat meat

brings has been eclipsed by the fat-and-heart-disease-fearing marketing boards and their tiresome desire for lean, bland meat.

Ontario Pork Communications manager Lilian Schaer says changes in breeding and in feed have made pork even leaner over the past decade, so much so that every cut available except for ribs now qualifies as "lean" or "extra lean" under the Heart and Stroke Foundation's Health Check program. Butchers are helping out further by trimming external fat closer to the flesh — down from an average of half an inch a decade ago to an eighth of an inch today. And the market — StatsCan reports — has responded with enthusiasm, for annual per capita pork consumption increased to 12.22 kg/person in 2002 from 11.23 kg/person in 1991, which is to say 9% (but according to my calculation, just 6.5% if you exclude me).

In happier days, when pigs were all bred to be fat, there were still many subtle differences between them. In 18th-century Britain, there were black pigs, white pigs and red ones. They came in different sizes, and ultimately, different breeds, all known by their county of origin: Essex, Yorkshire, Cumberland, Tamworth, Berkshire.

Most of what we get here today has a fair bit of Yorkshire in it, but is primarily Landrace, a Danish breed with a very long and lean belly, encouraged to be that way for the prospects of a big bacon yield. Berkshire, on the other hand, is a stout, fat and fabulously marbled number that yields the sort of loins that give the Heart and Stroke Foundation a shudder, or something worse. Berkshire is what I wanted, and I wanted a full loin, with no fat removed, and a full sheet of skin.

"I can do that for you," he said. A couple of weeks later, he did.



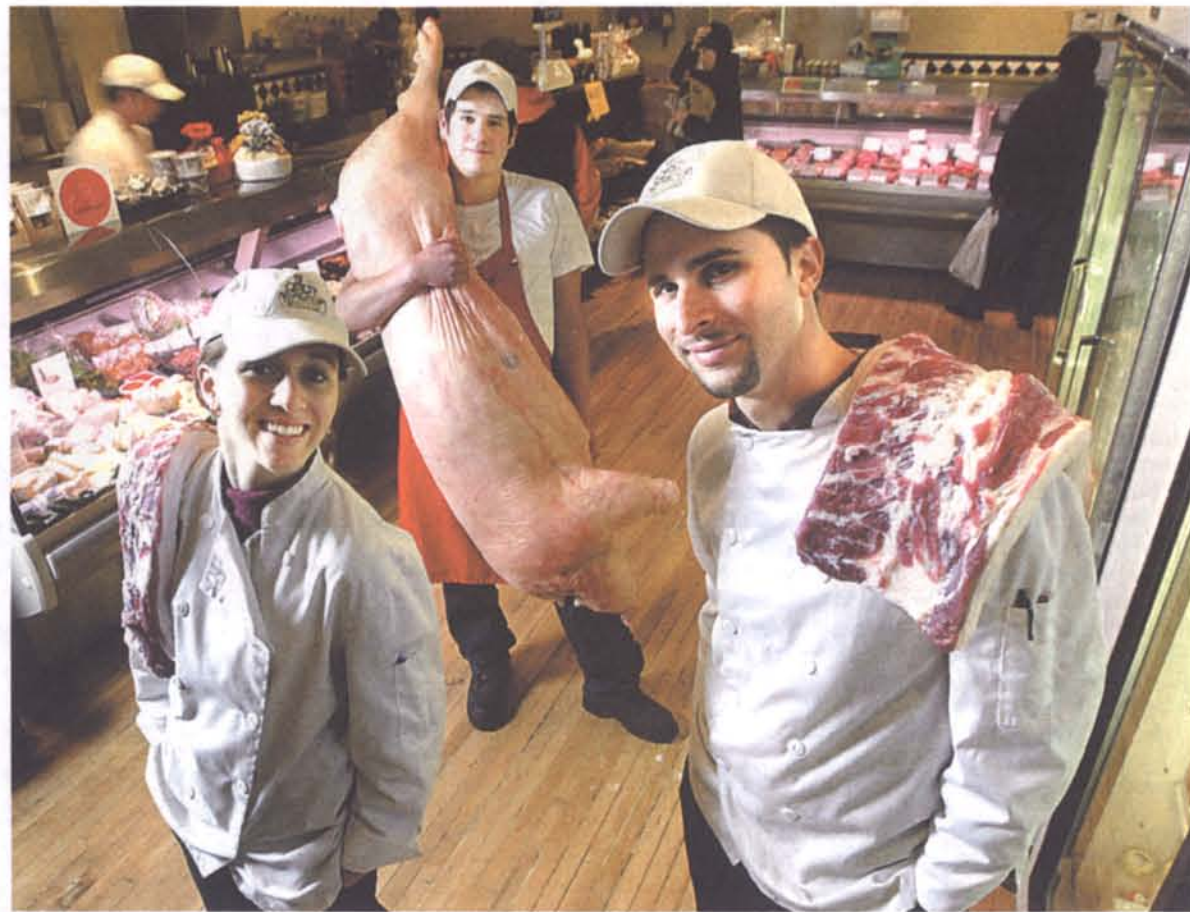
JACOB RICHLER

One Monday night a month or so back, nursing a fine port at the end of a seven-course stretch whilst awaiting the unveiling of a rare seven-year Ragusano (made from raw cow's milk in Sicily), I fell into a heated conversation with one of my tablemates, Stephen Alexander, owner of Cumbrae butchers on Church Street, about English pork butchery and vintage race cars.

"In a couple of weeks I'm bringing in some incredible pork," he said, voice hushed. "Berkshires — the Aston Martin of pigs."

Berkshires. Right. Allow me to explain:

It has been some 10,000 years since hungry man first domesticated the unlucky pig, and in the intervening years we have learned to breed them big or small, long or stout, fatty or muscular, and everything in between. Except for hereabouts, where the emphasis on how to grow that lovely beastie known by the moniker "a meal on legs" has been strictly on the muscular. Simply put, ever since the 1970s, the local pork industry has followed the same path as our beef industry, which is to say that the worthy quest for fattiness and the flavour it



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Healthy Butcher co-owners Tara Longo, left, and Mario Fiorucci, right, with head butcher Sebastian Cortez.

"These pigs have such dark meat and they put on a tremendous amount of fat," he said as he wrapped up my 12-rib rack, which had an inch or more of fat still wrapped around the loin, the thick pink skin over it perfectly intact. "The meat is so marbled. The farmer feeds them his own peas and corn, and you can taste it in that buttery fat."

Indeed. That night I popped it in the oven whole, brushing the skin with beer, and an hour or so later was tucking into one of the best pork chops I had ever eaten here. All that excess fat was of course discarded at service, for it had done its job of cossetting the meat during cooking. I only served the moist chop and the crispy crackling. And all that evening — and the morning after, at breakfast — I was a very happy man.

Happy enough to track down the farmer — Shane — who raised the thing, somewhere out near Wiarton. Which is when I learned that Shane is largely in the sheep-rearing business, and ended up raising Berkshire

pigs more or less by accident. In short, there are only three sources for Berkshires in Ontario. And when Shane visited one of them with the intentions of purchasing a single sow, the supplier begged him to take the whole useless lot of them off his hands instead.

Shane — bless him — is a very old-fashioned farmer. About 200 years out of date, by his estimate. He does not feed his pigs soybeans or canola as a protein supplement. He instead gives them peas and oats and barley and even some hay grown on his own farm, where they also get to root about a little outdoors, weather permitting.

"We're trying to get back in time," he says.

And I'm happy to go there with him, at least on the plate — and in my arteries, too. Because as it turns out, pork fat is low in polyunsaturated fats and high in monounsaturated fats and not so bad for you after all. At least when it is naturally fed, and not riddled with the anti-

depressants and antibiotics necessary to keep pigs alive in the modern pig-farming operation.

So when this week — beset by a craving for pork belly — I rang up Cumbrae for a swath, I found to my horror that they were fresh out. Fortunately, the Healthy Butcher had some in from one of the farmers who works under the aegis of Fieldgate Organics. The pig was a cross between an English black boar and a Berkshire/Landrace sow, and I will be preparing its belly two ways — one method plucked from Rob Feenie's latest cookbook, *Feenie's*, and the other, from *The Whole Beast*, the wonderful book by Fergus Henderson, chef at St. John, in London, England, a recipe that regrettably takes 11 days. But on a happier note, that is precisely when the next shipment of Berkshires is due at Cumbrae. Place orders now.

■ Cumbrae, 416-923-5600; the Healthy Butcher, 416-ORGANIC.

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