

# Globe Style

## NOTICED THE WHOLE HOG



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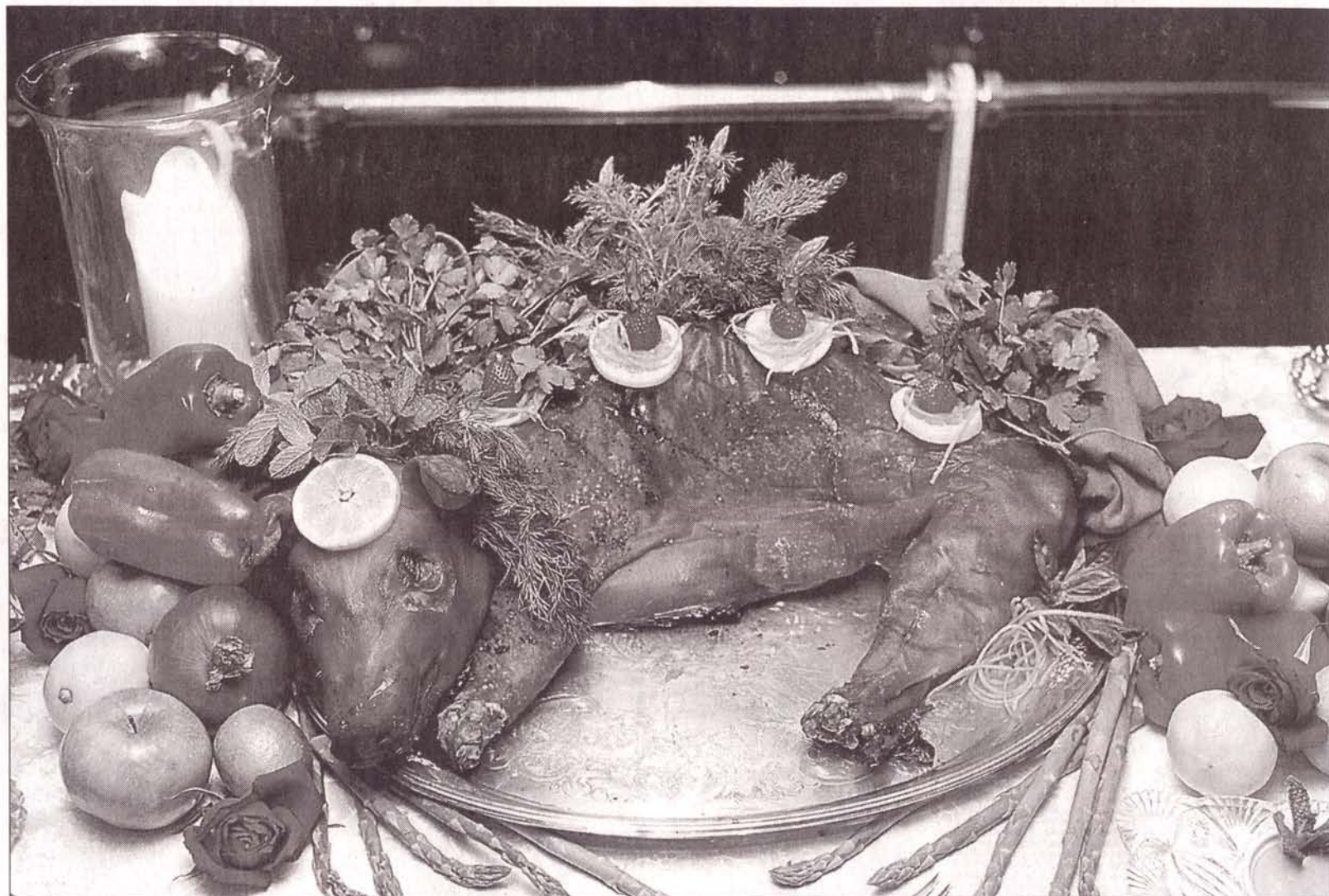
Others may hum Christmas songs. My shopping carol would have to be something like, "Looking for lard in all the wrong places." Okay, so it's a little bit country. But it fits.

Yup, I've been looking for lard. Real, rendered pig fat — as a gourmet health food. If you haven't yet choked on your low-fat yogurt and are still alive and reading, consider this: According to the experts, the blobby stuff of those scary-looking sculptures at the Royal Winter Fair not only makes the most beautiful crumbling pie crusts and the crispest hors d'oeuvre — free of trans-fatty hydrogenation — it also contains just 40 per cent saturated fat (it's 60 per cent for butter), while its level of mono-unsaturated fat (the good stuff) is an admirable 45 per cent (twice that of butter). Lardy may once have meant morbidly obese, but it's time to re-evaluate. Like coffee and chocolate, what was once verboten is now good for you.

Now that's settled, just try to find some. Looking for lard is no picnic. My kosher butcher, whom I frequent for fattier chickens and variety cuts for stews and soups, was out of the question. So I made a visit to Whole Foods, assuming that a self-professed holistic grocery might offer the whole hog. But its "back-to-the-land" approach was limited to biblical grains and peasant breads. Cumbræ's, a fine source for pork, doesn't sell it. And visits to both of Toronto's markets, St. Lawrence and Kensington, yielded only a home refrigerator overstuffed with cheese.

Then, right next to the Crisco in my neighbourhood Loblaws, I discovered a dusty block of no-name Pure Lard. At long last, culinary victory was within my grasp! Let the baking and frying begin! Except, later that evening, when I waved my hard-won trophy before my family, they happened to notice the fine print, which read, "May be hydrogenated," which rather defeated my purpose. Apparently lard is so anachronistic a concept, nobody really cares if the stuff's been transformed into a trans-fat by pumping it with water to prolong its shelf life. And they can go ahead and call it pure lard right on the label.

I would have given up my mis-



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Whether it's roast pig, gourmet pork crackling or bucatini all'amatriciana with guanciale (cured pork jowl), pig is big indeed.

sion entirely if I hadn't been noticing that everywhere I went, everyone was suddenly intent on celebrating the fruits of the pig. From restaurant menus to cookbooks, I kept hearing the siren call of scallops wrapped in prosciutto, applewood-smoked pork sausages, slow-roasted pork belly and pulled pork sandwiches. At the deli counter, signs urge me to try Serrano ham and double-smoked Danish bacon. And the more snout-to-tail the piggy offerings, the more chic: Gourmet offered recipes for pork crackling, and Saveur championed bucatini all'amatriciana with guanciale, or cured pork jowl. This summer at the cottage, I remember reading that Food and Wine was sponsoring a Fête du Cochon as a fundraiser where chefs and restaurateurs gathered to dine on a 248-kilogram pig, half of which had been slow-roasted for 24 hours, the other half hot-smoked, Texas barbecue fashion. Looking down at my mosquito-bitten wrist holding up the magazine, I even saw bacon: A friend had given me bandages made to look like bacon strips as a hostess gift.

Whether as a response to bovine spongiform encephalopathy scares or avian-flu hysteria, pig is big indeed. On-line, sites like [www.nichepork.org](http://www.nichepork.org), [iheartbacon.com](http://iheartbacon.com) and [Bacontarian.com](http://Bacontarian.com) are all about the hog.

Pig is the new olive oil: Making waves in the pork industry are boutique producers of heritage breeds such as Berkshire and Texas Wattle, which can't keep pace with the demand for fattier, tastier old-world pork from their clamouring high-end clientele. These niche producers are quickly becoming the food world's fashion equivalent — the provenance of their chops and loins turning up on menus like designer labels.

And the numbers are there to prove it: According to the U.S. National Pork Board, demand for all things pig, which had been consistently slow and steady for years, suddenly spiked by 5.3 per cent in the first three months of 2005 and shows no signs of slowing.

This month, as food writer Jeffrey Steingarten chronicles his obsession with heritage pork in *Vogue* magazine ("the flesh of the

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pig may be the most succulent and scrumptious of any meat we eat"), the big news is the arrival of the Kurobota, or Japanese Black pork chop, the hog's equivalent of Kobe beef, which promises to ratchet up our little piggie penchant to a whole new level. So where, then, amid this pig-fest, is my lard hiding?

A call to Mario Fiorucci, the proprietor of Toronto's newly opened Healthy Butcher, proved inspired. Along with bringing in organically raised, chemical-free meat, including pork, from a local co-operative of small farms called Fieldgate Organics, Fiorucci makes his own bacon and — renders his own

fresh lard in little \$1 cubes that last for weeks when sealed in the fridge.

He advises me to call first before coming in. "The restaurants are cleaning me out of everything I can get my hands on," he says.

Fiorucci's customers were mystified when he first started offering his own lard. "Now, I put it in the case without a sign and it's gone in an afternoon."

When I tell Fiorucci about my experience with grocery store pure lard that may or may not be hydrogenated, he is aghast: "If it's hydrogenated, well then it's not pure lard, is it?"

In his opinion, my little lard search and the pig's renaissance in general may signal that our fraught relationship with fat could be coming to an end. "People have experimented with low-fat diets and then Atkins. Now it's all about smaller portions of richer, more enjoyable meals," he says. "When all is said and done, life's too short not to eat well."

My quest completed, with a pantry now well larded for the holiday season, I couldn't agree more.