

Marvelous Mangalitsa

Prized Heritage Breed Yields Unparalleled Flavor

BY MARY ANN LIESER

Small-scale farmers looking to diversify their livestock should consider mangalitsa pigs, a heritage breed prized for flavor. Mangalitsas aren't suited for large operations or industrial farms. They seldom produce more than eight piglets when they farrow, and it takes over a year for them to reach market size. But gourmet chefs and devoted gastronomes are willing to pay more for the meat, which many believe is the best-tasting pork in the world.

The breed was developed in the nineteenth century by Austrian emperor Franz Josef, who crossbred wild boars with several Hungarian and Serbian breeds. "Mangalitsa" means "hog with a lot of lard" in the Hungarian language, and the breed was popular in Hungary until the middle of the twentieth century, when larger farms and a demand for leaner meat led to dwindling numbers of mangalitsas. Hungary had fewer than 200 in the early 1990s, when animal geneticist Peter Toth began a breeding program and encouraged farmers to raise mangalitsas in order to preserve the breed's gene pool. The motto "Eat them to save them" helped Hungary rediscover delicious mangalitsa sausage seasoned with paprika, and there are now thousands of mangalitsa sows in Hungary. Many have been exported as well. They first arrived in the US in 2007, and they've gained a devoted North American following.

For the last fifty or so years, commercial pigs have been bred to have less fat and to reach market size quickly. But less fat also means less flavor. And more subtle scientific analysis is now demonstrating that the nutritional profile of lard-type pigs like the mangalitsa is not necessarily the health disaster it was previously assumed to be. Foodies have helped rehabilitate lard's image. For example, lard has less saturated fat than butter does. And mangalitsa meat, especially when the pigs have spent time foraging outdoors, contains impressive levels of omega-3 fatty acids and antioxidants.

Jacobs Heritage is a fourth-generation family farm in northeast Ohio focused on heritage breeds of livestock, including poultry and lamb. Jennifer Jacobs has been keeping at least a couple of mangalitsas around the farm for the past



seven years. She was first drawn to the breed because of her own Hungarian ethnic heritage, and because of the claims that foodies made, touting the meat's juiciness, tenderness and flavor. She ordered some pork online and was impressed with the product – "Yes, it really is that good" – and acquired her first stock.

Ideally, mangalitsas spend most of their time outdoors and derive a portion of their nutrition from what they forage, whether in forest, pasture or meadow. They thrive in a wooded area that contains acorns, chestnuts, horse chestnuts or black walnuts, but can do well in almost any vegetative environment when supplemented with barley or wheat. Alfalfa, sunflower seeds, wheat bran, pumpkins and potatoes can provide additional supplementation; corn and soy aren't recommended, as the resulting fat will be of lower quality.

At Jacobs Heritage Farm, the pigs forage less than 20 percent of their diet, as the bulk of what they eat in the summer is excess produce from another local farm. They get hay in the winter and barley to finish on when they are close to processing time.

The distinctive fat is one of the mangalitsa's prime selling points. Most modern breeds are over 50 percent lean, but mangalitsa meat – red-

▲ The mangalitsa heritage breed takes longer to raise, but its high fat content makes it a prized pig among chefs.

dish flesh strikingly marbled with creamy white – is 65 to 70 percent fat. That high fat content means the meat can spend a longer time curing and developing flavor, because it can retain moisture during a long drying process, resulting in superior bacon and ham. Slow Food USA added the mangalitsa to its Ark of Taste, a “living catalog of delicious and distinctive foods facing extinction,” for that reason.

Mangalitsas are also the only remaining woolly breed of pig. There were others that are now extinct. Covered with a sheep-like fleece that can be black, red or blond, mangalitsas have a distinctive appearance. Their wool is coarse and doesn't have a practical use beyond keeping the pigs warm in cold weather. The wool makes them hardy in cold climates, but mangalitsas are currently being raised as far south as Florida. In warmer areas they shed more. And even in colder climates where they can thrive during extreme winters, the pigs need access to shelter where they can escape the elements when they choose.

Beyond that shelter, some electric fencing to define their boundaries and some supplements to their forage, mangalitsas don't require much. They're a hardy, low-maintenance breed. They are known for having calm and easygoing dispositions, being good mothers when they farrow, and being relatively problem-free. They are rooters, though, and they can tear up an area when foraging. When mangalitsas are rotated through pastures, replanting might be necessary.

Jacobs Heritage Farm keeps their mangalitsas in a pasture, with shelter available, and they haven't had to do any replanting. “The pasture does manage to regrow naturally in the summer in spite of the pig damage. A section of their pasture floods too when there is a lot of rain, and the pigs love that, especially when it's warm out. They forage in the water too.”

Most farmers new to the breed start with two gilts and a boar; mangalitsas are social and do well

in larger groupings too. Some breeders are experimenting by crossing the breed with Hampshires or Berkshires to shorten the time to market. Purebred mangalitsas should not be processed until fifteen months old, since it takes them about twice as long as other breeds to reach 280 to 300 pounds. When they are butchered, seam cutting is recommended in order to preserve the meat's marbling. And be prepared for lots of lard, which can be whipped, braised or smoked

with excellent results.

Most of Jacobs Heritage Farm's pork customers find them via the farm's website or through word-of-mouth. Once a potential customer samples the product they usually want more. As Jennifer says, “Red, deep, flavorful mangalitsa pork is quite different from tough, commercial, fast-growing ‘other white meat’ pork that is typical in the USA. It takes time and work to develop a market for this unique meat. But it is worth it.”

Amazingly Delightful!

KuneKune pigs are a grass fed source of sustainable marbled pork and highly prized for charcuterie.



The Best Pig for Homesteads and Small Farms.



americankunekunepigsociety.com