

# Peerless pork

by Leslie Cole, The Oregonian

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**Portland's charcuterie-obsessed chefs are prompting local farmers to feed hazelnuts to hogs, in the quest for a distinctive Northwest-style prosciutto**



Motoya Nakamura/The Oregonian For a special-occasion splurge, a roast of hazelnut-fed pork is hard to beat. Local chefs say the nuts create lots of sweet, almost nutty-tasting fat that makes for super-succulent meat.

Bacon fans, it's time to meet the new pig in town.

Get ready for hazelnut-fed pork, the latest entry in a hog-happy food scene that echoes what can only be called a national obsession with swine.

Nuts and pigs have nurtured a happy marriage for centuries -- think paper-thin slices of Prosciutto di Parma from pigs fattened on chestnuts and whey, or Spain's incomparable Iberico ham, from free-range hogs that gobble acorns as they roam.

**Recipes included with this story:** [Pork Carnevale](#), [Basic Pork Roast](#)

The reason: Pigs that eat oil-rich nuts in great quantities, especially in the last months before butchering, build up extra (and extra-tasty) fat; that's especially true for old breeds with genetics that encourage it. A well-marbled leg, with months of curing, becomes a succulent ham streaked with sweet, some say nutty-tasting, fat.

Considering that most commercial pork is bred and fed for leanness, chops and roasts from a nut-fed pig are special as well. "The fat on it is really flavorful," says Naomi Pomeroy of Beast. "Which is the whole reason that people like pork anyway."

And it's why, with the bulk of the nation's hazelnut crop at our feet, Oregon chefs and cured-meat fanatics started tossing around the idea of feeding hazelnuts to pigs.



Doug Beghtel/The Oregonian

A handful of local farmers now raise hazelnut-fed hogs, though in tiny numbers compared with even the smallest commercial pork producers. While it might conjure a picture of pigs romping through Northwest filbert orchards, it's more about what's in their food trays: ground-up hazelnuts that supplement the animals' normal rations of grain. Along with eating a special high-fat diet, nut-fed pigs at the most established producer are free to roam about their fenced-in environment.

The meat has found a following with chefs in Portland and Seattle, along with cured-meat geeks wanting to hang a leg for prosciutto, cure a pork belly or make salami at home.

Now everyday home cooks can experience it as well, with fresh chops, roasts and other cuts available at a few select meat counters and one Portland farmers market (see "Where to find nut-fed pork.").



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Fresh cuts of nut-fed pork won't likely deliver the flavor nuances you'd get in cured meats such as prosciutto or coppa, says Ben Meyer, owner of Ned Ludd restaurant in Northeast Portland. "With something like pork chops, aside from having a nice amount of fat on the outside, I don't think the average person is going to get a huge difference from that." But with slow-roasting, loins and shoulder roasts are crisp outside and extra tender and juicy within.

In March, Sweet Briar Farms sold its first hazelnut-fed pig to Chop Butchery & Charcuterie, the meat counter in Northwest Portland's City Market. The pig was one of eight that the farm has tested with nut-feeding so far. That's not much pork compared with the 10 to 20 hogs it sells each week to restaurants and farmers market customers, but Sweet Briar's marketing director, Petrene Moreland, says she has no trouble selling it. "It's just now really starting to catch on. I had a half a carcass to sell (recently) so I started asking around, and everyone wanted it."

Once the pigs are weaned, they're corn-fed for a few months, then moved to a separate area on the farm where they eat corn and crushed hazelnuts for one to three months before processing.

Nut-fed pork costs more to raise, because of the price of hazelnuts, and carries a higher price at restaurants and meat counters. Chop Butchery sells Carlton Farms pork loins for \$6.50 to \$7 a pound, while a nut-fed pork loin -- when they have the meat -- sells for \$9 to \$10 a pound, says Paula Markus, co-owner.



Motoya Nakamura/The Oregonian

Barb Foulke of Freddy Guys Hazelnuts raises a handful of pigs each year near Monmouth, mostly to dispense with the misfit hazelnuts she's left with after processing. It only takes a phone call or two, she says, to find a home for the nut-fed pigs with a local chef.

Last year, Wildwood executive chef Dustin Clark snapped up one of Foulke's hazelnut-fed Berkshire hogs, a breed known for its sweet, reddish meat. "The flavor was incredible, the meat was super-tender. We made porchetta, pancetta from the belly; we roasted chops."

The buttery fat from a nut-fed pig, Clark says, has a lower melting point than regular pork, and is softer and more delicate. "You can definitely taste the difference."

Another of Foulke's pigs went to chef Vitaly Paley, who cured a leg for prosciutto. "It had such complexity. It was sweet and salty and kind of glistened. The muscle structure was streaked with fat. ... You need that in the muscle to have the beautiful lovely lush mouth feel when you age it 14 months."

### **A shared ambition, and a partnership results**

The most ambitious project built on hazelnut-fed pigs to date is Tails & Trotters Charcuterie, the newly launched venture by clarklewis' former chef and butchering master, Morgan Brownlow, and Aaron Silverman, the man behind Greener Pastures free-range chickens.

Two and a half years ago, shortly after Silverman shuttered his poultry business, the two discovered their shared ambition of making dry-cured ham to rival the best Italian prosciutto. A partnership and a business was born.

"To me, it's like, how many hundreds of thousands of pounds of cured meat is shipped from Europe?" asks Brownlow. "We can apply those methods in Oregon, and create something local, something that meets or beats those time-tested traditions."

Both worked independently on the idea for half a dozen years, raising pigs on a part-hazelnut diet, consulting with nutritionists on the right nut-to-grain ratio and curing pork legs in Silverman's North Portland basement.

Although selling prosciutto and a full range of cured meats -- coppa, lomo, bacon, pancetta and guanciale -- is still the goal, a shaky economy and the lengthy process of getting licensed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to sell cured meat has pushed the release date of the first aged products into next year.

Meanwhile, Silverman and Brownlow started selling fresh pork to wholesale customers and at the Eastbank Farmers Market last week, priced at \$4.25 to \$8 a pound.

Based on the hours we spent cooking and nibbling in the FOODday test kitchen, feeding hazelnuts to pigs is a brilliant success. And while all that fat doesn't make it health food, if your menu calls for a splurge, nut-fed pork is certainly a candidate.

As for the cured meats, Brownlow and Silverman don't want to duplicate Italy's product so much as develop a Northwest prosciutto, unique in flavor, texture and appearance.

The pigs, a cross of Duroc, Berkshire, Yorkshire and Landrace, are raised according to their specifications by Pure Country Pork near Yakima, an established producer certified by Food Alliance for its sustainable and humane practices. Silverman worked with a nutritionist and rigorously tested the feeding program to come up with the right balance of nuts to grains for ideal weight gain and flavor.

They'll start out processing four to five hogs a week at a space they share with NICKY USA, the meat and game wholesaler, hoping eventually to process 1,500 to 2,000 pigs a year, "significant for smaller-scale farming," Silverman says.

Already what sets them apart from the handful of players making artisanal prosciutto in the U.S., and even some imports, is aging time: Imported prosciuttos typically hang for nine to 12 months, while a new East Coast company cures its hams in six months, according to Silverman, and the widely praised "prosciutto Americano" from Iowa's La Quercia brand cures for nine months.

"We're looking at a much slower process," Silverman says, noting that their large hams will cure for 18 to 24 months. "You end up with slightly denser prosciutto. It's similar to wine; if you give the enzymes enough time to do their magic, you end up with a better product."

It's why salumi masters like Paul Bertolli of Fra' Mani, who Brownlow trained with years ago at Oliveto in Oakland, Calif., have steered clear of prosciutto: "All that money hanging up in the air," Bertolli told The New York Times earlier this year. And it's why folks interested in trying Tails & Trotters' dry-cured hams will need a little patience.

### **An emerging cadre of cured-meat artisans**

Look for other local cured-meat artisans to emerge soon, such as Olympic Provisions, a salumeria from Clyde Common owner Nate Tilden, expected to open in early October on

Southeast Portland's Produce Row. "It's the next wave," says Steve Jones of Steve's Cheese, whose cured-meat sales account for a quarter of the sales at his Northwest Portland cheese counter.

In the meantime, pork lovers can busy themselves trying out some of the unusual cuts of fresh pork sold by Tails & Trotters, from brisket to flank steaks, flat irons, skirt steaks and what Brownlow calls "coppa": the head of the loin, which has interior and exterior marbling like a rib-eye.



Mike Davis/The Oregonian

"That's my favorite cut," Brownlow says. "It takes to longer cooking or braising, retains interior moisture and is still succulent."

In fact, most cuts of fresh pork from nut-fed pigs do well with low, slow cooking, Silverman says. "The fat renders out pretty quick. We've had feedback that cooking roasts at too high a temperature dries them out real quick. When you cook it much slower, it's better."

Not everyone raising prime pork in Oregon is chasing hazelnuts. Paul Atkinson of Laughing Stock Farm, who counts Nostrana, Paley's Place, Chez Panisse and San Francisco's Quince among his customers, says that although people want to hear his pigs are hazelnut-fed, they eat goat's milk, whey and cow's milk yogurt during the final six weeks before market, along with their regular ration of dry peas, fish meal and grains. The milk diet adds weight, evens out the meat's quality and uses a byproduct of his cheesemaking on the farm.

He says he's concerned about the amount of chemicals applied to hazelnuts and notes that too many nuts in a pig's diet can make the pork fat too soft and liquidy.

But feed, more than breed, makes great pork, he says, and hazelnuts are an obvious choice in the Northwest.

"If it results in a particular taste that somebody likes, I think it's great," he says.

"If they can figure it out, I'm all for it."

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