Demand For Pasture Pork Brings Back "Large Black" Pigs

The unique taste of Large Blacks is bringing back an English breed of forage hogs that had just about disappeared. The flavor of the meat of the pigs, named for their large droopy ears and black hair, has captured the interest of some world famous chefs. That interest has in turn begun capturing the interest of swine breeders looking for a new market. At $350 for an 8-week old pig, the supply is sold out nearly a year in advance.

"Right now I'm booked through next spring with all females sold and about a third of the males," reports Ted Smith, Laurel, Miss. "Some breeders are crossing them with leaner breeds."

Smith is one of the last breeders of Large Blacks and maintains the national registry. When he started with the breed in 1963, there were 53 breeders of registered herds in the U.S. Like most of them, he got out of the breed. Years later while visiting Great Britain, he saw the breed again and learned there were only 300 left in the world. Upon his return home, he started looking for breeders and only found one. Working with British breeders before the foot and mouth disease struck, Smith brought breeding stock through quarantine to supplement what the last U.S. breeder had. Today, Smith has 20 sows and 8 boars, and breed numbers are growing with 155 registered animals in North America.

"In Great Britain, there are five boar lines, and I have four of them and all five sow lines," says Smith. "I keep four sows of each sow line and a boar and one backup for each boar line or I would only need four."

While their color and ear size gave them their name, their selection as a forage hog made them unique. It probably also led to their near demise as the swine industry moved nearly entirely to feedlot production.

Smith reports the meat as being very fine textured and intermarbled in the ham and loin.

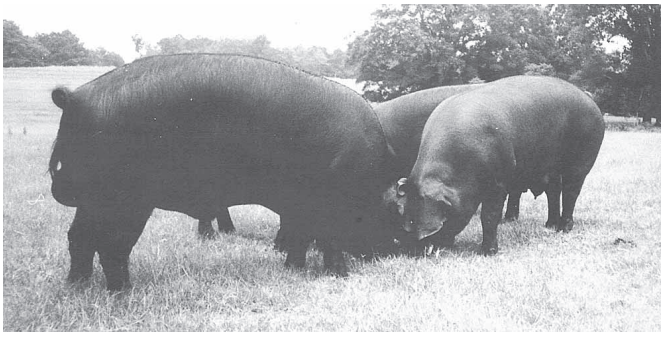
"The sows milk wonderfully and are quiet and very attentive," he says. "I've had first year gilts farrow 11 piglets and had an imported sow produce 15 when she was 10 years old. I usually expect 8-13 pigs per litter. Boars are easy to handle, too. They have to be if I can keep 8 boars with only 20 sows."

Smith tries to farrow each sow twice a year, getting a third litter every two years. In the summer, he grazes them on pasture grass behind cattle and supplements with millet. In the winter, he grazes them on a mixture of turnips (both rooted and forage), oats and rye grass. Smith estimates that during gestation sows get about 65 percent of their intake from forage.

"I like to put sows with litters on fresh pasture," he says. "I get them out of the barn as soon as I can. They like to wallow in the creek."

He feeds the baby pigs a 22 to 23 percent pellet and switches to 16 to 18 percent pelleted feed after 8 weeks on anything he keeps.

Boars are kept on pasture, too. He uses netting on all pastures with an electric wire a foot out from the fence. Smith reports no problems with rooting, and even if one does get out, it's not a problem.



Their unique taste has prompted renewed interest in Large Blacks, an English breed of forage hogs.

"If one gets out, it will just follow you around to the ends of the earth," he says.

Smith hopes the breed will expand now that it has been rediscovered. Until now, most people bought a couple of gilts and a boar for raising their own meat. He hopes that changes.

"I have a good breeder in Maine and a couple in Indiana and have sold 10 head to Canada," says Smith. "Rare Breeds Canada bought them and dispersed them. I also sold five boars to an artificial breeding stud in Iowa."

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They Milk Once A Day And Feed Only Grass

At a time when many dairies have started milking three times a day or more to maximize production, Ron and Barbara Crain have gone to once-a-day milking. They believe it pays off in higher quality milk for their yogurt-making business. To improve the health of their herd and the quality of their products, they've also dropped all grain from the herd diet. Their cows get only grass.

"We switched to once a day because it suited our yogurt production business," says Ron Crain. "We needed more time to do the production and marketing of our yogurt cheese and other products we were making on the farm."

The big fear of mastitis outbreaks and other problems didn't occur. The cows don't mind, and the producers benefit, too. The results matched those of dairymen in New Zealand, where an estimated 300 to 400 herds are OAD.

"Cow condition, health and reproductive performance all improve dramatically along with staff morale, while cost savings offset lost production to protect the bottom line," says Peter Gatley, general manager, Livestock Improvement in New Zealand. "Over half the farmers we surveyed are adamant they have not reduced their farm profit at all, and 28 percent believe it has actually improved."

Interest is high enough that Gatley's company is selecting for breeding stock that do well with once-a-day milking.

While the Crains won't say it has improved their farm profit, they do say it has improved their milk quality. While production dropped by about a third, milk solids, which dairy farmers are paid a premium for, have jumped. Butterfat went from 3.6 percent to 4 percent, and protein also jumped half a percent or more.

"For what we are doing, it is a plus," says Ron. "You concentrate solids, and they are what we need for our yogurt."

At the same time, they eliminated grain from the dairy ration. Ron thinks that may have helped herd health when going to once-a-day milking. Barbara says it has certainly helped with herd temperament, and Ron says it makes healthier milk.

"Researchers have shown that a balance of key fatty acids omega 6 and omega 3 is best, and feeding cows grass produces more balanced fatty acids in the milk," explains Ron.

Ron says grass feeding and once-daily milking have other benefits as well. "I can go weeks without starting my tractor up, saving money on fuel," he says. "And as it got hotter this year, we just moved our milking time to earlier in the day. That suits the cows, who graze best at night when it's cool."

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Rural Couple Makes Gourmet Vinegar

By Dee Goerge

With regional wines becoming a money-maker for rural people all over the country, one rural Minnesota couple has taken the next step. Ron Leasman, Long Prairie, makes specialty wine vinegars. This is not the cider vinegar your grandfather might have made, letting hard apple cider turn to vinegar in oak barrels. And it's not like vinaigrettes you find on store shelves, which are often artificially flavored.

"Why not have something that's real?" asks Ron who, along with his wife, Nancy, set up a "vinegary" in their garage.

His vinegars start with good wines that he makes out of apples, grapes, plums and cherries from his own orchard or from purchased warm climate fruits such as limes and papayas.

After a couple of months, once the wine is done, the real work begins. Ron takes a small portion of wine, adds a vinegar starter and covers it with paper filters so that oxygen can mix with the wine's alcohol to create acetic acid. Ron gradually adds more and more wine to the growing gelatinous substance. It takes at least 8 mos. before 6 gal. of juice becomes about 4 gal. of vinegar. When the vinegar tests 6 to 8 percent acidity, it is ready to be pasteurized and bottled. Ron then adds enough water to bring the acidity level down to 5 percent. "Eight percent will take your breath away," Nancy said.

Careful record keeping, constant testing, and a sanitary environment (licensed and inspected by the state) that is temperature-controlled are key to producing good vinegar. Ron researches and experiments, and he's had to throw out a few batches since he started learning the art of vinegar making eight years ago.

But running a vinegary is also about art. Batches are small; combinations are inspired. As a certified herbalist, Nancy infuses some of Ron's vinegars with herbs, many of which she grows — basil, thyme, oregano, dill, sage and lovage. Ron especially likes rosemary in rhubarb vinegar, a perfect accent to most kinds of meat. Nancy uses her husband's vinegars in many dishes from salads to appetizers to desserts.

Ron and Nancy Leasman make specialty wine vinegars. The attractive bottles are corked and sealed with beeswax.

Recipes and about 30 different vinegar products are on the Leasmans' website. The attractive bottles are corked and sealed with beeswax, provided by a local beekeeper who keeps bee boxes on the Leasmans' property.

Besides the Internet, the Long Prairie couple sells their vinegar through whole food cooperatives and to individuals. The Leasmans offer tours of their rural home's gardens, the orchard, and the vinegary.

They are seeking new wholesale markets — either stores or restaurants. Starting at $9.95/bottle retail, the Leasmans' gourmet vinegar is one-third the price of other gourmet vinegars.

Many of Ron's vinegars taste good enough to put on ice and drink all by themselves.

You can buy a sampler pack of four 1.7-oz. bottles for $12.95 plus $7.90 S&H.

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