

Hungarian Pigs Famous For Fat

Forget about the "other white meat". Chefs in fancy restaurants are starting to look for "extreme fat" hogs. Mangalitsas from Hungary are not just lard-type hogs; they produce a fat so soft that it practically melts in the hand. Uses for it include whipping it like cream for desserts and other special dishes. The marbled pork from the Hungarian hogs sells to restaurants for about \$11 per pound hanging weight and \$25 per pound retail. Mangalitsa importer Heath Putnam says demand has so far outstripped supply.

"I have no trouble selling what we have, but there isn't enough product to have a real feel for how big the demand really is," he says.

Putnam owns the only breeding herd of Mangalitsas in North America. He invested more than \$150,000 importing a small herd in 2006. Such imports have since been prohibited. Starting out with 24 sows, his breeding herd has since expanded to 100 head. In addition, he's doing some cross breeding with Berkshires.

Putnam retains ownership of all females and select males for breeding.

"I have three experienced hog producers now breeding hogs for me," says Putnam. "One is in Washington State, and the others are in the Midwest. I am looking for more, particularly guys who used to be breeders, not just hog finishers."

Putnam says breeding knowledge is important. The breed has a low birthing average of only 5.5 live pigs. However, the most experienced of his three contract producers has an average above seven. At the prices the pigs command, every piglet is highly valued.

Putnam markets 200 to 220-lb. fed hogs and also sells 30-lb. barrows to interested buyers for \$240 each. The breed is not fast growing and takes 9 to 12 months to reach the 220-lb. weight. He says some buyers of barrows feed them even longer to higher weights for the best cured products.

Putnam warns that even with the high price a hog carcass brings, his hogs aren't like other niche breeds. The unique flavor and still relatively unknown breed means you have to find buyers for each animal and, if possible, for the entire animal.

"With Berkshires and other specialty breeds, you can sell loins to a customer and



Mangalitsas pigs produce a fat so soft it practically melts in your hand.

dump the rest on the conventional market," he says. "With the fat level and marbling of the Mangalitsas, you have to sell all of it as specialty products to a select market. It's not like you have people calling up to buy the meat."

That may change as awareness and demand continues to build. Mangalitsas are in high demand in Europe. Their high level of unsat-

urated fat makes them ideal for a traditional air curing process. In Spain, for example, cured Mangalitsa hams can sell for \$70 per pound.

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Chinese Pigs Provide Big Pig Profit Potential

Carl Blake hopes to use a hard-to-get hog breed from China called Meishans, to create an American version of a rare German swine breed.

"Swabian Hall hogs were developed from a cross of Meishan and European wild boar in the 1820's," explains Blake. "It has long been known as the tastiest pig in Europe, so my goal is to recreate that breed for this market. I've already had two customers tell me they will buy all the Swabian Halls I can produce."

There are a limited number of Swabian Hall breeders in Europe, and they're in high demand. However, due to import restrictions, they can't be brought here. Blake heard that there were Meishan hogs available for sale at Iowa State University. They had been brought into the U.S. for research purposes decades ago. Meishans are known for their wrinkly hide and ability to put on large quantities of high quality fat.

With the Meishan program closing down, the university put them up for sale. Initially, the breeding stock sold for more than \$700 each. By the end of June and the planned end of the program, the price had dropped to \$200 each for remaining stock. That price is expected to skyrocket again. Blake reports one hog breeding firm

selling Meishan/Yorkshire cross-bred sows for \$1,500 or more.

The appeal of the breed is neither their looks nor their meat production. The baggy skin makes them look like a swine version of Shar-Pei dogs. It's their ability to store fat, combined with aggressive breeding, that makes them interesting.

"The meat is well marbled with ribbons of fat throughout. It is really tasty, very flavorful," says John Newton, ISU research station superintendent. "The trouble is there isn't much of it. If you butcher them at 200 lbs., you'll get less than 30 percent edible meat by the time you remove the excess fat, skin and bones."

The Meishan reach a roaster market weight of 50 to 60 lbs. at 6 months of age. It will take them 3 1/2 years to reach a mature size of 350 to 400 lbs. However, Blake figures that like the original Swabian Hall breeders, he can make tasty pork without the excess fat by crossing with wild boar. The crossing part should be easy. Male and female Meishan mature sexually very early, breeding by 60 days of age. They are also extremely easy to handle. Newton reports using them to identify sows in heat, but being able to back them off the sow, simply by grabbing them by the ear.



Swabian Hall hogs were developed from a cross of Meishan pigs and European wild boar. Meishan hogs, like the one shown at left, have baggy skin that makes them look like Shar-Pei dogs.

Blake originally bought two boars and two sows from ISU. Since then he has purchased several more. He plans to maintain four separate breeding lines of Meishan to preserve access to the breed as well as cross them with multiple lines of European wild boar that he has obtained from other breeders.

"After I get my first two litters of purebred Meishan, I'll start crossing," he says. "The Meishan is the fattiest pig I've ever seen, and the European wild boar is solid meat. We'll see what happens when we cross them."

One thing Blake doesn't have to worry about is litter size. They can produce litters in the low 20's. Newton reports 9 litters av-

eraging 17 pigs each, with the sows easily raising the entire litter.

Blake hasn't established a selling price for either the purebred Meishans or his soon to be Swabian Halls.

He's working with several experienced hog breeders in his area. Blake sees the Swabian Hall as an opportunity for small farmers. "If we can pull off anything close to Swabian Halls, it'll open new markets," says Blake. He says he's looking for investor partners to help expand the breed.

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Is This A Peep Or A Shig?

It's got the shape of a pig but the coat of a sheep. Whether you call it a "peep" or a "shig", the curly-haired animals have been getting a lot of attention since a British hog farmer managed to import 14 of the rare hogs from Austria in 2006.

Austrian Mangalitzas hogs got their start in the early 1900's when Lincolnshire Curly Coat hogs, which have been extinct since 1972, were exported to Austria and Hungary and crossbred with local breeds. The resulting Austrian Mangalitzas hogs are now a rare breed in Austria. Hog farmer Tony York worked for years to find and import the breed and has now established three separate breeding lines, including all three colors of coats - Blonde, Red, and Swallow-Bellied.



Rare Austrian Mangalitzas hogs have a long curly, wool-like coat.

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