

The Promising Possibilities of Pastured Pork By Bill Henning

“If you’re a chef searching for an old-fashioned, well marbled pork chop, go to the Rodeo Drive of Pork Production. Boutique pork producers offer designer labels such as Berkshire, Korubota, and Duroc – these are the Guccis of pork, with a taste that one chef describes as “wonderfully piggy.” Farmers are putting the fat back into these hogs while following the traditional principles of sound animal husbandry, good genetics, and conscientious land stewardship.” The preceding was excerpted from *The National Culinary Review*, February 2004.

While close to 90% of today’s pork comes, directly or indirectly, from large producers, there is a rapidly growing opportunity for small farms in organic or natural production. The National Pork Board (NPB) estimates that 40% to 80% of consumers are interested in either organic or natural pork. This type of production can be an overwhelming challenge for the mega-producers, but lucrative for the well-managed small family farm. The NPB feels so strongly about this it has established a new web site: www.nichepork.org.

Generally speaking, this type of pork production prohibits the use of antibiotics, growth stimulants, meat bi-products, farrowing crates, and fully slatted floors. It encourages the use of pasture, deep-bedded pens with straw, and certain humane standards. Some marketing options also require that family members perform all labor and management.

This requires a ‘high health’ method of management. Natural or organic production removes many of the ‘crutches’ used routinely in mass production. For optimum natural production hogs must be managed in a manner to prevent disease by minimizing stress and maximizing the use of the hog’s natural immune system. At least one international swine nutrition company has also recognized this growing demand for natural production and established a nutritional program specifically for this market. These programs are available through smaller, independent feed companies throughout the country. We have at least one of those companies here in New York.

There are various marketing opportunities. The most lucrative of which is direct pork marketing. This can also be time consuming, selling is not something that everyone wants to do, and selling all of the hog might be a challenge. But it’s worth repeating: Direct marketing is the most lucrative option for the person so inclined.

There are other options. There are at least seven companies that market this type of pork. At least one has a guaranteed floor price and they all buy the whole hog. Or better yet, combine a number of market outlets. Don’t forget breeding stock sales, people are often looking for feeder pigs, and 75-pound roasters are popular in the summer. The opportunities for small-scale farming are only bounded by our perceptions and imaginations. What do you see in your future?