

PLANET FOOD

March 2002

PORK

Did you know?

There is a 40 million tonne pig manure mountain in the Netherlands – too much to spread on land so they are thinking of exporting it.

EDITORIAL – PORK 2002



I have a couple of friends who rear their own pigs. And I have been lucky enough to buy meat from them. The great advantage of this is that there is no doubt about where the pigs have come from – my children have even had the pleasure of feeding them windfall apples in the Autumn.

The meat from these home-reared pork is noticeably different – it has a slightly stronger taste and is much more fatty. The extra fat is a source of dispute in our house – I think it enhances the succulence in the cooking, but my husband thinks it is excessive and tries to cut most of it off before putting a joint in the oven. There's certainly no shortage or crackling on home-reared pork!

Interestingly home-reared pork is very rarely organic. If you feed the pigs kitchen waste (this may not be legal any more), which does not come from organic produce, it would not fit the criteria. For most other animals you need to buy bought in food, so this is not an issue.

But in February I went to see how commercial pigs are reared and visited Cranswick in Yorkshire. They showed me what they did and told me all about the complexities of pig feed in today's world. Interestingly they said that the main impact of foot and mouth for pig farmers were restrictions on moving livestock as most pig herds managed to avoid the disease.

2. INTO PIGS

Feed the pigs

A key part of a pigs diet is soya. It is by far the best crop for giving pigs the right amount of protein. But the market for soya in the last few years has been complicated by the fact that much of it is now genetically modified (GM). Of the three main soya producing countries – the US, Argentina and Brazil, only Brazil is really offering 'GM-free' soya and even then primarily in the North of the country.

Even 'GM-free' sources of soya potentially have a problem with contamination. And testing for contamination is both expensive and not strictly accurate down to very minute levels – no company can now guarantee 100% GM-free sources, even if they believe that to be the case. Another problem here is that whilst Brazilian 'GM-free' soya is available in our summer months, it is difficult to store it for the whole year. So in the winter we are largely forced to rely on sources grown in the Northern Hemisphere, and that effectively means the US, where 50% of soya is genetically modified. This means that GM-free soya in this season is both less available and more expensive, although apparently segregation (separation of GM from non-GM is increasing in the US).

Retailers wanting to offer pork that has not been fed with GM animal feed, not surprisingly, have to pay a premium. Organic standards require organic feed that has been checked to ensure it is 'GM-free' and in some cases 'free range' pork will also be 'GM-free'. But most of the pork we buy will still be given feed containing 'GM' soya.

Another source of protein for pigs comes from fishmeal. Fishmeal is made from waste fish in processing or from industrially caught small fish. Much of this is used for feeding farmed fish, as well as for producing fish oil in human food. It is expensive and unsustainable – if we haul out too many small fish from the ocean, we are removing the food supply for bigger fish, as well as dolphins and sea birds. Any fish included in organic rations however, has to be a by-product of human consumption.

Fish meal is, thankfully, only a small part of a pig's diet today and may be phased out over the next few years. However, it is still a vital part of the diet for piglets shortly after they have been weaned. It provides a quick burst of protein, apparently necessary for speedy growth, which means that they are less likely to produce fatty meat when they mature.

Hormones, growth promoters and antibiotics.

Have no fear – hormones have apparently not been used in UK pigs for at least 20 years. Antibiotic growth promoters, on the other hand are still being used, although their use is declining.

In the last 5 years the EU have banned a number of the traditional antibiotic growth promoters. Some farmers still believe that antibiotic growth promoters are effective but other disagree. Thankfully, however, it looks as though there is a limited shelf life for the antibiotic growth promoters as supermarkets respond to consumer concerns over their use.

The veterinary use of antibiotics in farming is now tightly regulated. Their use has to be authorised by a vet, so the farmer is not able to dose the whole herd without justification.

Antibiotics, copper diet supplements and probiotics for growth promotion are prohibited in organic pig diets.

Pig breeds

Most pigs we buy will be commercial hybrids, bred over the years to produce the lean meat wanted by today's consumers. But for those who wish to be more adventurous, it is possible to buy meat from rare breed pigs at selected outlets. The Rare Breeds Survival Trust, whose aim it is to conserve pure breed animals, provide a list of shops selling this meat, on their website.



Rare breed meat is something special that will almost certainly never be available through supermarkets. For a start it would not be possible to provide enough to meet demands – the entire world population of Gloucester Old Spots, for example, would be consumed in a couple of months, if sold throughout one major supermarket chain. Furthermore the fat and flavour of rare breeds would not fit with supermarket requirements.

The Middle White and Berkshire are early maturing pigs that have delicious sweet tasting, fine grain meat. But the five other rare breeds can be used for both pork or bacon – they need to be heavier for bacon. These include: Gloucestershire Old Spots, British Saddleback, Tamworth, British Lop and the Large Black. And they are all slower growing than commercial pigs.

The Rare Breeds Survival Trust aims to preserve the pure breed stock of animals, so they don't get cross bred. By buying tasty rare breed pork, we could be helping to conserve pig breeds that might otherwise be lost to the world.

Hamming it

Did you know?

Process hams for slicing may contain as much as 20% water in the final offering.

The main differences between the quality of hams are the cuts that are chosen, the amount of added water and the extent to which the meat has been massaged. Quality ham will be 100% meat, whereas processed ham may have as much as 20% added water.

To make a ham, the pork joint is immersed in tanks full of brine or injected with brine by a large multi needle contraption (an injector), which is lowered onto the meat. The brine solution will contain cold water, salt and sodium nitrite. Each producer will have their own brine recipe and some will add spices for flavouring. The meat will then be cooked.

PIGS ON THE RUN

Cranswick are a large-scale pig producer who supply most of the major supermarkets

Cranswick are quoted on the UK stock market. Their main business is pigs. They make a range of pork products, rear pigs and produce animal feed for pigs (and poultry) but they also produce pet food and aquatic systems for tropical fish. The company is based in East Riding, Yorkshire, the heart of one of the UK's three key pig areas – the other two are in East Anglia and Scotland. It makes sense to rear pigs close to the cereal crops they both eat and use for bedding (the stalks). A further benefit is that their manure can be used as fertiliser for the crops.

Although Cranswick sell a large number pigs from other farms, they also produce a lot themselves. And all of what they produce themselves are bred outside. This means that the breeding sows live in the open, with little huts (known as 'purpose-built sow arcs'!) to use as shelter. Shelter is crucial for pigs because they are very sensitive to the sun and cold - in fact I remember hearing that they are the only animal apart from humans which suffer from sun burn, although my brother says that his horse got a sun burnt nose!

The sows are impregnated by the boars and produce about two litters a year, which are suckled until the piglets are four weeks old. Organic and free-range piglets remain outdoors, with access to shelter, whereas others are transferred to large airy barns, where they are fattened up for slaughter – optimum size is about 100kgs. When we looked at them over the barn door, they ran around in excitement rather like foals do when you go near their field. Apparently this is a sign that they are healthy and happy.

Outdoor pigs may be happier but Cranswick say that they can also be quite aggressively protective. The sows realise that they are able to defend their young and are quite prepared to do so if someone picks one up for inspection or treatment. In intensive systems- under veterinary authorisation piglets may have their teeth clipped (to stop them biting), their tails docked (to stop them being bitten) and be given injections of iron (to supplement their feed). The fact that the intensively reared sows have more regular contact with humans may be why it is apparently easier to pick up a piglet and administer tasks, such as these, without being attacked.

Organic pigs are treated in a similar way to free-range. The main differences are that they are fed organic feed, reared on land that has been certified as organic and, of course, are only treated with medicine approved under the organic standards. Other recommendations for organic pigs include: not weaning them until 8 weeks and ensuring they have access to outside runs, with dunging, rooting and exercise areas which include rubbing posts.

Only a miniscule proportion of the pork we buy in supermarkets is either organic or free range because most of us are not prepared to pay the premium charged. Clearly, if more of us are prepared to pay what it costs, there will be a lot more happy healthy pigs trotting around in Yorkshire and elsewhere!

PIG CONTACTS

COMPASSION IN WORLD FARMING

01730 264 208 / www.ciwf.co.uk

CRANSWICK COUNTRY FOODS

Inglemire Lane, Cottingham, Hull HU16 4PJ / Tel: 01482 848180 www.cranswick.co.uk

RARE BREEDS SURVIVAL TRUST

02476 696551 / www.rbst.org.uk

SOIL ASSOCIATION 0117 929 0661 / www.soilassociation.org