
The Sustainable Pork Smack

Five reasons to think hard about that p

Why you should choose Midwestern pork

BY SAMIN NOSRAT

Before *Edible San Francisco* readers start lobbing flaming Molotov pigtails at me, let me say that as a cook, I was brought up in the Chez Panisse kitchen. And as a writer, I've studied with *Omnivore's Dilemma* author Michael Pollan. Hopefully, that bit of history demonstrates my commitment to supporting a local food system. But, I am also an environmentalist, and as a cook, I pride myself in taking a holistic view of things, both in the kitchen and beyond. So when I started hearing about why, when it comes to pork, the "Buy Local" creed doesn't always lead to the most responsible consumer decisions, I was intrigued. Here's what I've learned:

Midwestern pork from family farms has a smaller carbon footprint. Transporting large amounts of grain over long distances generates a lot of CO₂ emissions. Paul Willis, manager of Niman Ranch Pork Company, draws this picture, "On average, a pig must eat 4 pounds of grain to gain a pound of weight, but less than half of a pig's weight at slaughter is edible. So, should you ship 8 pounds of grain from the Midwest, where it is grown, to feed the Californian pigs, or 1 pound of pork from the Midwest to feed the Californian humans?" Environmentally, the choice is clear: ship less weight.

As for the local-grain argument, Iowa prosciutto maker Herb Eckhouse points out that corn grows easily in the Midwestern climate, so "why would you want to grow corn on irrigated land in the Central Valley?" For example, Jude Becker grows the organic corn that becomes feed for his pigs in Dyersville, Iowa, something that would be prohibitively expensive and environmentally irresponsible to do in California. Some argue that pigs will eat anything, so why ship grain to feed them? "Pigs are very adaptable animals, but you won't

produce very much pork by feeding them table scraps," says Willis, arguing that meat quality will also suffer from an inconsistent diet.

Lastly, the drastic shortage of slaughterhouses and processing plants in California (see next point) means that the pigs have to travel further, usually in diesel trucks, to get harvested.

...can make use of the efficiencies of a strong infrastructure. For Bill Niman, Midwestern pork is "about so much more than just where the grain is. A complex web of specialized industries in the Midwest ensures that every part of the pig gets used." That web ranges from fat renderers to pet food manufacturers, and those who collect hides to send to Asia to be processed into leather. The manure goes to cropland.

Whereas "the pig industry in California is so small that many of the by-products go to waste," argues Niman. That Midwestern infrastructure helps lower prices, and "consumers are willing to pay premiums for things raised the right way, but not for inefficiencies from farm to table." For example, the average cost of slaughter in the Midwest hovers around \$15 per animal, whereas in California it can be almost three or four times that.



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Breakdown: Midwest vs. Bay Area

Work on your fork. ILLUSTRATION BY MARCOS SORENSEN



Why you should choose Bay Area pork

BY BONNIE AZAB POWELL

I have to confess something: I have a hog in this race. In addition to being a freelance writer and editor, I moonlight as a meat slinger, volunteering for Clark Summit Farm in Tomales, CA, helping run its “meat

club,” a Community Supported Agriculture program that serves about 70 families and has a waiting list of 200 more. With the very occasional exception, I don’t eat meat unless I know where it’s from. I’ll happily order a pork chop labeled Niman Ranch or Willis in a restaurant, confident that the pig from whence it was cut lived mostly outdoors on a small farm, with its tail intact, and wasn’t routinely fed antibiotics. But I believe in a “good, better, best” ranking of values when it comes to food, and for me, pork from Bay Area producers tops that hierarchy. Here’s why:

Bay Area pork offers true transparency. All the farms listed on page 23 allow interested customers to make appointments to visit and see their operations firsthand. “People know what we’re saying is what we’re actually doing—you can verify it,” says Rebecca Thistlewait of TLC Ranch, near Santa Cruz. “And you can’t do that if your producer is in Iowa. You have to rely on their marketing material, and we all know how much misinformation there is out there.” Labels that certify humane treatment and sustainable operations are good, but there’s just something about being able to meet the farmers and their workers, to see how the pigs are treated and housed, where

the sows give birth, and ask questions about what they eat and why, that trumps a website or a brochure any day.

...has a smaller carbon footprint. Sound familiar from the previous page’s argument? Well, it depends on which pigskin-shoe salesman is measuring the foot. While it’s true that Iowa is the No. 1 U.S. producer of feed grains, not all grain sold in California comes from the Midwest. Most local producers buy their grain from Modesto Milling, “and yes the soy in our feed comes from Iowa, but the wheat and the corn comes from both Montana and California, and the kelp meal comes from California,” says Thistlewait. “Sometimes there’s barley in there that happens to be from California.”

Because grain is expensive, California producers also tend to be more creative with their hog feed. “Our animals are getting between half and a pound of off-farm feed. The rest is either our own grain, culled organic vegetables from our farm, or forage,” says Tim Mueller of Riverdog Hog, the new-ish pork arm of Riverdog Farms, proudly. “We are trying to raise animals that have a really light footprint on our ecosystem.” (How does it taste? Keep reading.)

Mueller has started growing his own grain for the hogs, to supplement the organic grain he buys from Modesto Milling. Last year he grew roughly 5 acres of peas, 15 acres of barley, and 6 acres of safflower, and this year he’ll raise 15 acres of peas, 25 acres of barley, and 6 acres of triticale. “It’s all rainfed, totally dry-farmed grain,” he says. “I don’t believe in irrigating crops to feed them to animals. Most Iowa farmers get subsidies to raise their grain. I don’t want to participate in this crazy Midwest grain scene for many reasons.”

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...boasts superior taste and texture. As a cook, I am primarily interested in taste—I want everything I make to be as delicious as possible. At Eccolo, we regularly buy locally raised pork, but we're often disappointed with the texture of the meat, which tends to be either tough or mushy as a result of the pigs' inconsistent diet.

Says Eckhouse, "Corn and soybeans are our 'terroir.' You hear all about the pigs raised for prosciutto di Parma being fed whey from the nearby Parmigiano-Reggiano dairies, but whey-fed pigs are too lean. In fact, INCA, which sets guidelines for making traditional foods in Italy, recommends a diet consisting primarily of corn and soy for prosciutto pigs, supplemented with a minimal amount of whey."

Even Cal Peternell, co-chef of locavore-ethos early-adopter Chez Panisse Café, admits, "Jude Becker's pork is the best I've ever tasted."

...offers greater animal welfare and safety. Pig farming is a way of life in the Midwest. As Iowa hog farmer Ken Kehrli says, "We've got multigenerational farmers who intimately understand the physical and nutritional needs of the pigs, and can give them the care they need to express the best attributes once their muscle becomes meat."

Kehrli adds that most, if not all, of the slaughterhouses he

works with are large enough to have hired renowned animal welfare expert Temple Grandin to evaluate how the animals are held and slaughtered. Which, Niman points out, is important: "The big businesses have realized that the animal's temperament at the time of slaughter has a huge impact on meat quality. So they may not have taken these measures for altruistic reasons, but the end product is the same: the food is safe and wholesome for the public and they've reduced liability. The smaller, older processing plants, like what we have in California, just don't have the deep pockets to be able to address food safety and animal welfare in the same way."

...just makes more sense. California is mostly grassland, so grazing animals such as cattle, sheep and goats are the most sustainable local choices.

"The idea of raising pork here on any kind of scale is not something that I would advocate," says Niman. "If you could somehow justify shipping grain to California, it should be fed to chickens, because a pound of grain translates into a pound of live chicken."

Or, says Peternell, we could take a different approach: "The truth is, people just need to get used to eating less meat. Not so long ago, rural families would harvest one pig in the winter and live off that meat for the entire year. It's completely possible."

Who's oinking

Jude Becker, owner of Becker Lane Organic Farm in Dyersville, IA

Herb Eckhouse, cofounder, co-owner and prosciutto maker at La Quercia, Norwalk, IA

Ken Kehrli, Berkshire pig farmer, Winthrop, IA, and partner with Becker in Green Visions, Inc.



Bill Niman, founder of Niman Ranch and founder and owner of BN Ranch Farmer Network, Bolinas, CA

Cal Peternell, co-chef of Chez Panisse Café in Berkeley, CA

Paul Willis, manager of Niman Ranch Pork Company and owner of the Willis Free Range Pig Farm, with 2,500 hogs, in Thornton, IA.



...contributes to a healthy local infrastructure. The more people demand locally raised pork, the more farmers will be brave or foolhardy enough to try to supply it, and the more the necessary operations that support them—like butcher shops and slaughterhouses—will remain in business. Currently there are three USDA-inspected, swine-only slaughterhouses and six multispecies ones within 200 miles of San Francisco. Most are family owned, and all are very small, handling a few hundred head per week, compared with the massive slaughterhouses in the Midwest that can slaughter hundreds an hour.

"From a food security perspective, we need to go back to having a more regional food supply," argues Thistlewait. "If we don't support it, we're going to lose whatever infrastructure we have left here on the West, the mills, the custom butcher shops, and slaughterhouses. I don't want to be depending on food from across the country when oil prices keep getting higher."

...isn't part of a national problem. According to USDA figures, Minnesota, Missouri, and Iowa, three of the top ten hog-producing states in the nation, have had an explosion of factory farms: Since 1996, the number of industrial hog operations has increased by 122% in Minnesota, 140% in Missouri, and 155% in Iowa. In 2007 Iowa alone slaughtered 30 million hogs, or 10 for every Iowan. California, by contrast, killed 2.6 million, or a hog for every 14 Californians. Those three Midwestern states suffer from a surfeit of antibiotics-laced animal manure—far more than the agricultural land can support, which is why the federal government will actually pay for industrial hog operations to create manure "lagoons" and even to ship their waste elsewhere.

Let's be clear: the Midwestern operations Samin lists in the box above are small, family-owned farms raising their animals with care. But the truth is, Iowa needs fewer hogs, not more.

"We just don't want that concentration of dust, feces, and pathogens in one area," summarizes Thistlewait. "Let's spread out. Let's have little 250-pig operations like ours all over the country."

...tastes like pork should. "You can definitely taste how we raise our pigs in the pork," says Liz Cunninghame, of Clark Summit Farm. "Our pigs run around and eat a varied diet. They taste like they've had a life." Her hogs get leftover organic whey from Cowgirl Creamery and whatever they can forage in the pasture, in addition to grain.

Thistlewait points out that the famous prized ham from Spain, *jamon Iberico*, comes from pigs that are finished on acorns. "Pigs don't have to be raised on that much grain to get fat," she says. "Sure, if you feed pigs a lot of trash, then their pork tastes like trash. But there are plenty of high-quality foods that aren't grain." TLC is looking for land with oak trees, so the pigs can forage for acorns in addition to whatever bugs the

pasture has to offer. She and her husband Jim Dunlop also get 10 tons of organic culled vegetables from Happy Boy Farm that they feed to the pigs.

Berkeley chef Omri Aronow, who says he is very conscious of his restaurant's ecological choices, ordered a whole hog from Riverdog Hog last spring. He pronounced it "delicious," even if "slightly leaner than the pork I saw when I cooked at Oliveto." (Oliveto sources its pork from Paul Willis and others.)

Mueller admits that last spring's hogs were "a little on the lean side," but "we got them a lot rounder this summer by feeding them lots of good carbs like tomatoes and melon. The current batch has a lot of fat on them." Riverdog hogs also munch on black walnuts from trees in the pasture.

"Basically, we need to be working more with the local chefs about what kind of food system they want to participate in," says Mueller. "Because we should be talk-

ing about a seasonal pig, one that gets what's available, rational, and sustainable for it to eat." **SF**

Who's oinking

Omri Aronow, chef at Adagia Restaurant in Berkeley, CA.

Liz Cunninghame, who with husband Dan Bagley raises pastured hogs, chickens (laying and meat), and cattle at Clark Summit Ranch in Tomales, CA.

Tim Mueller raises hogs under the name Riverdog Hog, part of the Riverdog Farm organic vegetable farm in Guinda, CA.



Rebecca Thistlewait runs TLC Ranch, which raises hogs and laying hens, with her husband Jim Dunlop in Aptos, CA.

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