

BOY MEETS PIG...AND GOES ORGANIC

Sustainable, delicious, and post-modern

BY LISA FUTTERMAN



It's a classic story. Boy is raised on conventional Iowa pig farm. Boy graduates from Iowa State University and brings home outlandish ideas about organic farming. Boy converts farm and grows business from six sows to 6,000 humanely raised, organically certified pigs per year.

The boy is Jude Becker, now 32, a thoughtful farmer whose Becker Lane Organic pigs are sought after by many of the nation's most thoughtful chefs, from Judy Rogers at San Francisco's Zuni Café, to Chicago's Bruce Sherman at North Pond restaurant. His family has lived and worked their 400 acres in Dyersville, Iowa for six generations, raising not only Berkshire and Chester White pigs, but also the organically certified corn, soy, and oats the swine consume in winter when not on pasture. "We are still micro, compared to the commodity pork producers," says Becker, who employs only four people to maintain the farm alongside him.

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—Jude Becker

"Perplexed" by the developments in agriculture since World War II, Becker researched the European "food production engine" for answers. "European organic and sustainable farming practices are about 15 years ahead of ours."

In 2004, after consulting with a Danish farmer about recent shifts in ideology about birthing piglets year round, Becker Lane adopted the use of straw-lined galvanized steel farrowing (birthing) huts to house sows and their litters, kept temperate in any weather by the animals' own body heat. These portable "high-end huts" allow pigs to be birthed year round to satisfy the never-ending demands of a hungry restaurant market. "Farmers are rethinking the traditional processes," says Becker. "We want to be responsible but also reliable." Because the huts are portable, they can be moved from pasture to pasture, allowing this season's manure to fertilize next season's feed.

Chefs like Brian Huston of the Publican, Chicago's hippest pork emporium, are willing to pay significantly more for what Becker calls "post-modern pigs." Huston sees happy pigs that are raised humanely as "a bonus," producing incredibly tasty, well-marbled meat. The process of communicating and building a relationship with



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Pig photos courtesy of Becker Lane Organic Farm, prosciutto photo courtesy of Kurt Michael Friese

the farmer has become the real joy for Huston, who helped open the Publican in autumn 2008. “We are two guys new to the scene, trying to figure it out—how to make a great restaurant work, and how to make a great pork product.” Becker and Huston have worked closely to make it work for both teams. “At first we were buying whole animals,” says Huston, “but not using the hams, because they are too lean and we just don’t have the time and space right now to properly cure them. So Jude arranged a trade out with artisan prosciutto maker La Quercia and now we get extra shoulders and they get extra hams.” Becker also has the Publican’s pigs processed with the skin

on, so that Huston’s team can create their signature fried pork rinds.

North Pond chef Bruce Sherman agrees that the relationship between farmer and chef is key. “It’s akin to the farmer who is harvesting baby turnips sized just for us,” says Sherman. North Pond purchases whole pigs from Becker, and uses every morsel from meaty head to curly tail. “The head goes in head cheese and we cure the cheeks and jowls for guanciale. The shoulder meat gets braised or made into sausage, and the belly becomes bacon. Chops land on the center of the plate; the loin is smoked; the tenderloin grilled, and the trotters and tail get braised and picked for charcuterie.”

In 2006 Becker began feeding acorns to a select few of his Berkshire pigs for Iowa’s La Quercia Acorn Edition Prosciutto. La Quercia owners Herb and Kathy Eckhouse sought pigs that fed on the fruit of the oak, an Italian and Spanish tradition believed to produce, according to Becker “a complexity in the flavor of the ham brought out by the tannins in the acorns.” He also supplies organic hams (including some of the Publican’s “extras”) for their renowned organic prosciutto.

The growing trend towards the “nose to tail” approach to meat purchasing works out just fine for Becker. “I do not just raise pork loins, so it benefits me when chefs learn to utilize the whole animal.” Deep down, Becker possesses the old soul of a 19th century farmer. When asked about California’s recently passed Proposition 2 which regulates animal confinement, Becker responded diplomatically but honestly. “It’s a step in the right direction, but is mostly symbolic.” What truly seems important, in this age of consumer awareness and food traceability, is building relationships between supplier and end user. “Restaurants like the Publican and North Pond can’t exist without good ingredients, and it is beautiful for chefs to be able to call a farmer and get what they need. It completes the circle of sustainability.”

Lisa Futterman, seasoned chef and food writer in the urban ‘hoods covers every story from “nose to tail,” never missing an opportunity to enlighten our readers about sustainable farming practices.

