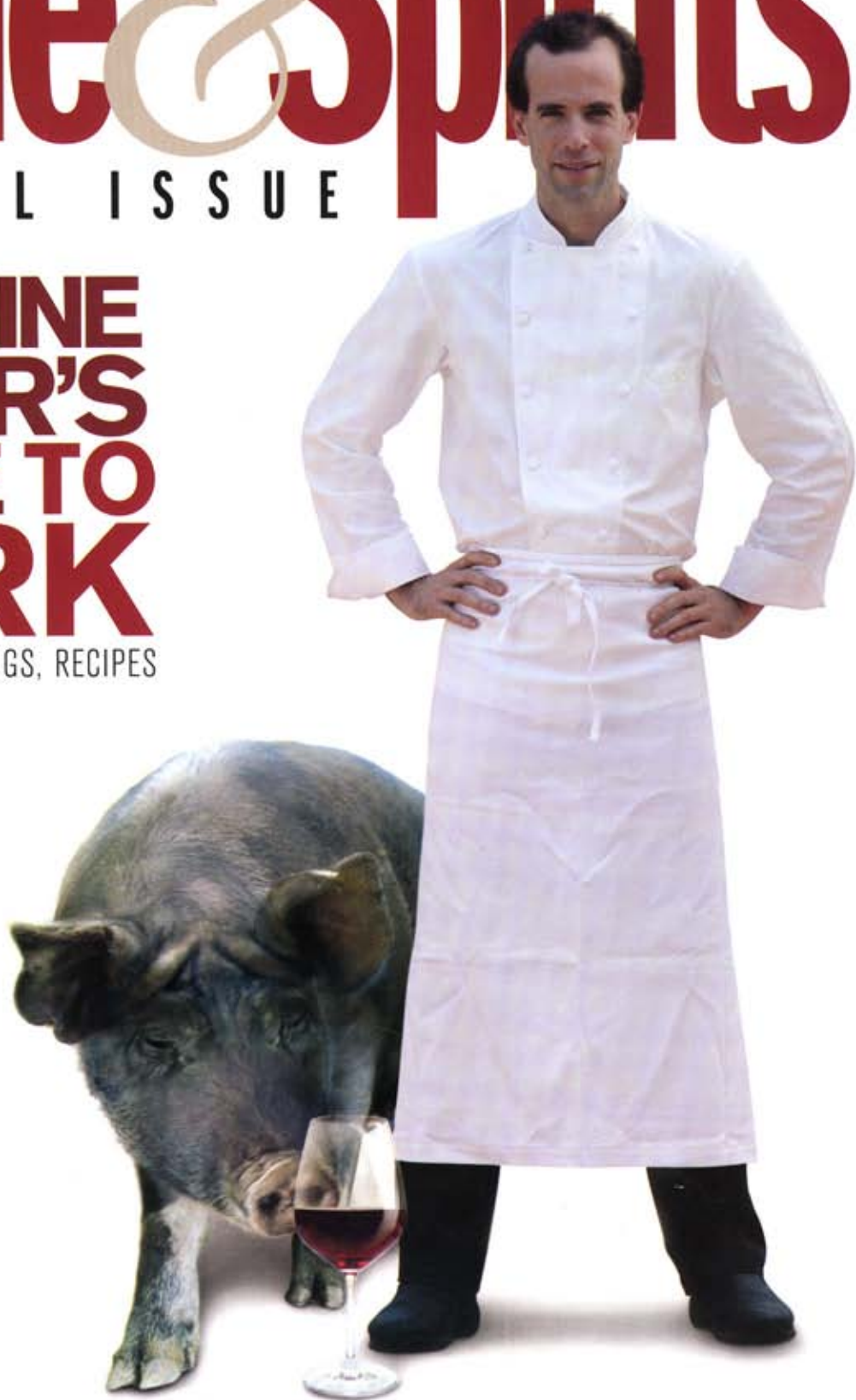


Wine & Spirits

SPECIAL ISSUE

THE WINE LOVER'S GUIDE TO PORK

TASTINGS, WINE PAIRINGS, RECIPES



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TALKING PIG WITH DAN BARBER

Chef Dan Barber talks with Melissa Clark about the importance of being well bred, from his restaurant *Blue Hill at Stone Barns*, in Westchester, New York.



[Ed. note: *Stone Barns* is a non-profit center for food and agriculture established in memory of Peggy Rockefeller, who had been a founder of American Farmland Trust. The center is dedicated to locally-grown food—locally prepared and consumed at the restaurant on site, *Blue Hill*.]

Clark: Raising your own pigs was one of your priorities at Stone Barns, and I know choosing the breed was important. In the end you chose to raise Berkshire pigs. Why Berkshires?

Barber: For my purposes in the kitchen, a fattier pig is a better pig. And the Berkshires have sweet, fully flavored fat that marbles very well.

A lot of pork is being marketed as 'rare breed' or 'heritage' pork. What does that mean?

Barber: These are older breeds of pigs, like my Berks, that aren't bred for factory farms and supermarkets. They are fattier and have darker, more intense meat, which scares some people off. They're definitely not tasteless, lean, 'other white meat.'

What breeds will I find at my local supermarket?

Barber: Most supermarket pork is a cross between two breeds, Yorkshire and Landrace. One breed is a supergrower and will put on a lot of bulk quickly. The other is really hardy and will be able to take all the antibiotics they give them. These pigs don't grow hair so they are easier to deal with. But they wouldn't be able to survive outside. They're just bred for factory farms. Probably around ninety-five percent of the pigs in this country are like that.

What is the alternative?

Barber: Buying your pork from small farms, which will usually be raising one of the rare breeds. If you start asking around, you'll find

Large Blacks, which are very similar to Berkshires, and Durocs and Tamworths, which are also full of fat, but I don't think their fat is distributed as well as the Berkshires, though that's a personal belief. Durocs used to be really common on traditional farms, and now there is a bit of Duroc in the factory breeds. There are others as well, but those four are probably the most prevalent.

If you had to gamble, what would you say is the next big trend in pork breeds?

Barber: Definitely the Ossabaw. If you consider the Berkshire to be the big one now, I think Ossabaw is going to be the next one. The fat there is even better than the Berkshire. The Ossabaws are raised on acorns, which gives them great-tasting fat. More and more I'm realizing that what you're feeding the pig makes much more of a difference than the breed.

Then let's talk about diet. What do you feed your pigs at Stone Barns? Do they get acorns?

Barber: We only feed our pigs things we can find in our local environment, and we're trying not to import anything. It'd be one thing if Stone Barns was located near an acorn forest, but we would never buy acorns, except maybe on an experimental basis. First of all, it's freaking expensive, and second of all, it goes against the whole idea that one of the wonders of pigs is that they're so easy to raise and so beneficial to the upkeep of your farm because they clear out shrubs and regenerate the soil, and they do it all really easily. You basically stick them in a paddock. Berks love wooded areas because they love the shade cover, and they love to forage in the forest.

What are they foraging?

Barber: Shrubs, roots, grass, whatever they find. Forage makes up twenty percent of their diet. Another seventy-five percent or so of their diet, depending on the year, is organic grain, a mix of all different kinds. Factory-farm pigs never get any forage or vegetables. One hundred percent of their diet is grain and of that ninety-eight percent is corn.

Is that bad?

Barber: Well, in some ways it's not. I mean, pigs love corn; they get drunk off of it. But in terms of health benefits for us, there's a lot of research showing that pigs fed a mix of different grains, not just corn, and forage and vegetables, develop fat that is more digestible for us, more healthy and less saturated than just corn-fed meat. A concentrated corn diet, whether it's in beef or chicken or pigs, is increasingly being shown to have a terrible effect on our hearts, and some say is a link to the explosion in heart disease over the last forty years. Fifty years ago farm animals were never fed the amount of corn they get now.

So that pastoral image of a "corn-fed" pig or cow might actually be unhealthy for us? What is the best diet for pigs in terms of our health?

Barber: Acorns and other nuts are good if you are raising pigs in an area that has them growing. But more generally, grass is where you get a real benefit. That's where all the micronutrients are. It's very hard to measure and very subtle, but a lot of nutritionists are increasingly coming

out with studies to show that eating grass-fed animals can be beneficial, in some respects, to our health.

Have you ever had a pork taste-off of the different breeds?

Barber: Well, I've done a lot of tasting and talked to a lot of people and done other research, and at the end of the day it all seems to come down to keeping the pigs as happy as possible. Our farmer at Stone Barns, Craig Haney, has a theory that the best-tasting pork is from the happiest pig. So what Craig is doing is creating an environment on the farm to make the pig the happiest it can be, and to express its pigness in the most extreme way, be it through diet or by giving them plenty of room to root around and the shade cover they like.

Working in a restaurant, wouldn't you feed your pigs kitchen scraps?

Barber: We do. The variance in their diet is pretty phenomenal. We divide our trash into pig trash, laying hens trash, chicken trash and regular trash. The pigs get all the vegetable scraps.

Like, for example, truffle shavings in season?

Barber: Ha! Well, it wouldn't be far-fetched to say that. We have used truffles and scraps do go into the vegetable garbage, so they do get some of that. But more than that it's a whole mix of vegetables that would otherwise go into the trash. Now it gets recycled and comes back to us in the tastiest pork. It's a nice little system. ■



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