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The Next Big Pig

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What first catches your attention about the Hungarian mangalica pig is its sci-fi appearance. The woolly porker looks like what might result from genetically crossing a pig and a sheep - something that (as far as we know) hasn't yet occurred.

Despite its odd appearance, the mangalica's meat is rich and delicious, and was enjoyed in Hungary for decades.

But as recently as 1991, mangalica pigs were on the brink of extinction. Now, thanks in part to Spanish cured-pork producer Jamones Segovia S.A., which saw the potential of the fat-rich Hungarian pork to produce excellent cured hams, they're back.

Owing to the same changes in import restrictions that paved the way for the introduction of Spanish serrano and Iberico ham to Canada, mangalica hams are destined for the North American market in the coming year.

Michael Tkaczuk, president and CEO of Toronto's Serrano Imports, came across mangalica ham by chance at a Barcelona food fair in March of this year. On tasting it and hearing the story of the salvation of the unique mangalica breed, he knew that his company, which also brought serrano and Iberico ham to Canada, had to import it. "This product is just unbelievable," he says.

Indeed, the cured ham, estimated to sell at \$150 per kilogram, is a worthy addition to foodie "must try" lists. With its maroon colour, rich aroma, smooth texture and robust, slightly salty flavour, it's a close cousin to the high-end jamon Iberico that arrived in Canadian stores last April.

Derek Bendig, chef de cuisine at Toronto's Pangaea restaurant, is one of the few Canadians who have tasted the ham, and is eagerly anticipating its arrival. "The ham is spectacular," he says. "The story behind it is a great selling feature," he adds.

Developed by 19th-century Hungarian farmers seeking a fatty yet hardy pig, the mangalica breed was highly sought after in the late 1800s and again during the Second World War, when food shortages prevailed and fat was highly prized.

The pigs' woolly bodies were well suited to the cold climate of the Carpathian basin, where they were first bred, and their rich meat and resistance to disease added to their value.

But as popular tastes shifted toward lean meat, and the Hungarian government began to subsidize leaner breeds, mangalica pigs - victims of low fertility - nearly disappeared in the late 20th century.

By the early 1990s, the breed "had been completely forgotten, and was practically extinct," says Peter Toth, chairman of the National Association of Mangalica Breeders and managing director of Olmos & Toth Ltd., the Hungarian affiliate of Spain's Jamones Segovia. "The total number [in 1991] was 198 pigs; it did not even reach 200," he adds.

It was at that time that Juan Olmos, then managing director of Jamones Segovia, took an interest in the breed as a potential source of product for the Spanish market. Undaunted by the decimated stock, Mr. Toth and Mr. Olmos set out to revive the species.

"In the first three, four years of the enterprise, the task was gathering and saving the last animals existing in the world," Mr. Toth says. "I myself with an all-terrain vehicle and a trailer went all over the country to find the animals ... and I bought up the last of the pigs."

In 1995, with about 300 animals, Olmos & Toth established a breeding program and a genetic bank for mangalica stock in Hungary. The bank, still maintained by Olmos & Toth, is now subsidized by the Hungarian government and is still the principal repository of mangalica genes in the world.

Re-establishing the species was "a matter of many years, much money and much dedication," Mr. Toth says. The current livestock numbers of well over 50,000 are the payoff.

The mangalica pigs, whose meat is used for the Spanish-cured mangalica ham, continue to be raised in a traditional manner by Hungarian farmers. The pigs are free-range and feed largely on barley, wheat and corn, as well as grasses and other plants they forage.

The better portion of meat is shipped to Spain for curing, while the rest is used within Hungary to produce salami.

The Spanish product, which caters to Spanish tastes and relies on Spanish curing methods, is distinct from the traditional Hungarian mangalica products, such as salami and lard, which have been enjoying a renaissance.

"The revival ... is a little bit linked to Hungarian nationalism and pride in the old agricultural heritage," says Gabor Lovei, one of the coordinators of the Slow Food Presidium, which works with artisanal Hungarian farmers and producers to help preserve traditional mangalica products. While he values the role of the Spanish in helping to preserve mangalica livestock, he hopes the profile and production of Hungarian mangalica products will continue to grow.

The Canadian public will have to wait to get a taste of mangalica pork. The delivery date for the Spanish-cured mangalica hams will probably not be until mid-2009.