

Globe Toronto

Hog Heaven

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The village of La Alberca, in the low mountains of the Sierra de Francia in western Spain, resembles many towns in the region: Locals still smoke pipes in the main square and donkeys tread the cobblestone streets carrying farmers and their products.

But La Alerca stands out for the stone statue of a pig in front of its church - a sign of the region's veneration of noble Iberian swine.

The area around La Alberca is one of the few in Spain where black-hoofed Iberian pigs, descendants of the wild boars that once roamed the peninsula, are raised free-range in the oak forests, where they feed on acorns. The cured ham produced from these pigs (jamon iberico) ranks with white truffles and beluga caviar as one of the food world's coveted wonders.

At an expected \$300 a kilogram or more (about \$1,500 a leg), the highest (bellota) grade of this ham will have a commensurately wondrous price tag when it arrives in Canadian food shops and restaurants for the first time, probably this week, following one Canadian's five-year quest to bring it here.

"This product is really special," says Michael Tkaczuk, president and chief executive officer of Toronto's Serrano Imports, the force behind the ham's arrival in Canada.

He's not the only fan. "It's absolutely fantastic," says chef Massimo Capra of Toronto's Mistura restaurant, which will be among the first to get the ham. "Canadians should be really excited to be getting it.

Something like that is really something to rejoice about. We're not used to making this type of ham here. We're not used to getting it here."

Chef Martin Kouprie of Toronto's Pangaea, which will be involved in the official launch of the ham on April 10, echoes the sentiment. While he says he typically prefers to work with local producers, this ham simply can't be produced locally.

Last summer, Pangaea served fresh Iberian pork it obtained as a sample at \$50 a plate (single chops were served over potato rosti and organic vegetables). The dish was so popular that the restaurant ran out of the meat in two days. "People said it was better than they ever imagined and they actually saw the value in it," Mr. Kouprie said.

When the Iberian ham is sliced, ideally by hand and paper thin, it is a deep maroon colour, shot with creamy fat. Placed in the mouth, it barely needs chewing; the smooth, nutty flavour explodes and the meat nearly melts apart.

The flavour is so exquisite that Pangaea intends to serve it unadorned, with only roasted red pepper and artichokes as accompaniment.

And the story that comes with the ham gives it another dimension. Iberian pigs are a singular race. Their black hooves, slim legs and shiny red-black coats are often-cited distinguishing features.

But it is a genetic deformity that makes the meat so coveted: The pigs' fat penetrates muscle mass so well that the result is a thoroughly marbled, richly flavoured and tender meat. The fat is said to approximate olive oil in the high levels of oleic acids it contains, and has properties that lower bad (LDL) cholesterol and increase good (HDL) cholesterol.

To produce the highest quality Iberian ham (called jamon iberico de bellota), Iberian pigs are released in the last months of their lives into oak forests indigenous to the low mountain ranges of southern and central Spain.

Between November and late March, the pigs approximately double their weight by feeding on fresh mountain grasses and acorns that fall to the ground, which infuses the meat with its prized nutty flavour.

Traditional producers approach the slaughter of these pampered animals with great reverence, referring to it as "the sacrifice." In a ritual that mimics an ancient religious rite, the pigs are not fed for 24 hours to remove impurities from their systems before being killed by the puncturing of the jugular vein. They are usually rendered unconscious with CO₂ or stunned electrically before slaughter in order to reduce their stress and thereby preserve the quality of the meat.

In accordance with centuries-old tradition, legs of ham are cured in sea salt and dried at stringently controlled temperatures and humidity levels. The entire process can last up to 24 months.

Even in Spain, where ham is a way of life, Iberian ham is prized.

When Mr. Tkaczuk first contemplated importing the ham to Canada in 2003, there were restrictions on the import of pork slaughtered in Spain. But by June, 2005, concerns over various swine diseases in Spain were dispelled, said Elham Guirguis of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, and "fresh meat and processed meat products derived from swine originating in Spain [were]eligible for import into Canada, as long as they [were]slaughtered in an approved plant."

Once Canada opened its doors, the challenge was getting the first exporter interested and approved. Because the supply of Iberian ham is relatively inelastic, the demand in Spain and Europe is already high, and the cost of complying with North American standards is significant.

Mr. Tkaczuk approached Embutidos Fermin, a small family-owned producer in La Alberca that is currently the only exporter to the United States.

"Fermin wasn't initially thinking of Canada," said Raul Martin, who is responsible for Fermin's North American export business. "Michael approached us."

Then Mr. Tkaczuk began the wooing. "Fermin seemed a little nervous at first. We used the contacts we had in the Spanish government and others to help convince Fermin to work with us," he said.

Ultimately, it worked, and Fermin applied for Canadian approval, a process that has involved the inevitable delays and expenses occasioned by two countries' bureaucracies.

The first shipment of Fermin's jamon iberico is now on the ground in Canada for CFIA inspection. It is hoped that the ham will be available for sale this week in Vancouver, Winnipeg, Ottawa, Toronto and Montreal.

In a rare jump on their American neighbours, Canadians will be able to purchase the highest grade of the ham (bellota, or 100-per-cent acorn fed) before the same product gets to the United States, expected in July. A lower grade arrived in the United States in December, 2007, and, at \$1,000 (U.S.) a leg, the first hams sold out in the blink of an eye.

Based on buzz alone, the Canadian experience is likely to be no different.

Special to The Globe and Mail

Where can you find Iberian ham in Vancouver?

"The shipment is here," says Mr. Tkaczuk, who has been patiently waiting for his order to pass customs at Pearson Airport where it is currently costing him \$400 a day in storage. "It might be a few weeks before you see it in Vancouver," he says.

When the prized pig does come our way, it will be distributed through Bosa Foods. No one has any idea exactly how much the prized delicacy will cost. It is estimated to retail for at least \$300 per kilogram.

"It's not going to be cheap, that's for sure," says Lui Bruschetta, Bosa Food's vice-president of sales.

The BC restaurants with a guaranteed shipment include The Bearfoot Bistro, Carumba and La Rua (all in Whistler), plus Il Giardino and Cioppino's Mediterranean Grill (Vancouver). Other than Bosa, the only retailer on the exclusive list is the Oyama Sausage Co. on Granville Island.

"There are a lot of people in line," says Mr. Bruschetta. "I think people here are really waiting for it."

-- Alexandra Gill