

Hog wild



Chalk one up for the nerds, the diehards, the people who stay to the bitter end of every party. At Pangaea, on Thursday, Michael Tkaczuk of Serrano Imports introduced an extraordinary prize to the city—the famous dry-cured hams of the Ibérico pig (also known as the Pata Negra or Black Foot pig) of southwestern Spain. I remember the night, years ago, when Tkaczuk first brought Serrano ham to Toronto—a soirée at Bouchon. Even then he had his sights set on the superior and world-renowned Ibérico, but it takes time to persuade Canadian bureaucrats of the virtue of foreign delicacies. Now we can taste.

Everyone knows pigs are extremely sagacious and interesting animals. These ones are particularly attractive—black, sturdy and with long, rather elegant legs—the last free-ranging and free-grazing pigs in Europe. They roam the *dehesa*, the grassy Spanish woodland, feeding on herbs and mushrooms and also, during the winter, on the nutritious acorns that fall from cork oaks, holm oaks and gall oaks onto the scanty grasses below. You and I have our uses for acorns, no doubt—to make ink or flour or to carve and paint, turning them into a kind of currency that can be swapped with gullible children for the sticky treats they hoard on Halloween night. The Ibérico pigs merely eat them, doubling their weight, gaining as much as a two pounds a day during the peak season—two pounds of particularly well marbled, exceptionally delicious muscle, full of sweet nutty nuances from the acorns.

But this is where chance steps in. Pigs born in the early winter have timed their brief span perfectly, gorging on acorns and wild plants for the last three months of their allotted 15. Less fortunate swine born at other times of the year will find their final 12-week vacation falling during the acornless summer or spring. Their long last supper will be ameliorated with gifts of grain, which is all very well, but grain doesn't produce the marvellous flavours eventually presented by their balanivorous brethren.

Did last Thursday's nerds know this? Possibly. That's why they're nerds. The party, incidentally, was a triumph with a plethora of renowned chefs present, excellent Spanish wines courtesy of Lucas Wines of Toronto and gorgeous dainties created by Martin Kouprie (chef and co-owner of Pangaea, of course) and Chris McDonald (primo apostle of Spanish hams). Kouprie's dishes included wee slices of the roasted loin of the pig on top of a spoonful of gorgeous paella. He also laid a slice of the ham over lentil salad and, as a separate treat, primed it with roasted bell peppers and a pesto gougère. McDonald made croquetas with Pedro Jimenez mustard. He spread sea urchin butter onto crunchy toasts and topped it with the ham and a gentle kimchee. He delivered the coup de grace with another crunchy *pincho* topped with pork, a slab of cider-cured foie gras, pickled wild leeks and spiced pear. So very scrumptious.

For the first couple of hours, we all gorged on these treats, not entirely aware that they were made with the thighs of two pigs who were not born in the early spring and therefore did not end their days in acornland. It was still fabulous ham and genuine Ibérico. Then, when most of the guests had gone home, a shoulder of the true *bellota* (acorn-fattened) Ibérico appeared, carved into paper-thin epigrams by a talented Spanish chef, Diego Hernandez, brought in for the evening. Notably different! The fat looked a tad more translucent and melted more easily on the tongue. It was sweeter, nuttier, more deeply flavoured. Those of us who remained fell upon it, stuffing it into our mouths with our fingers, muttering expressions of approval in low Castilian. So this is what all the fuss is about! Tkaczuk has rewarded Toronto's top chefs by supplying them with this remarkable pork from his supplier, Embutidos Fermin. You can find it at Pusateri's as well if you want to go the retail route. One other thing to note: these hams raise good, HDL cholesterol and lower bad cholesterol, so you can eat them with your doctor's blessing and also, I would suggest, with a nod of gratitude to the noble, black-trottered pigs in question.

I don't usually write about dinners I haven't tasted, but this is an exception. A couple of months ago, Lorenzo Loseto, chef of George, announced he was putting together an evening to raise funds for the Alzheimer Society of Toronto. Loseto's father, Vito, died from Alzheimer's five years ago. His friends stepped in to bat, including Anthony Walsh from Canoe, Rob Bartley of Four Seasons, Tobey Nemeth from Jamie Kennedy Kitchens and Loseto's sous-chef Fiona Lim and former apprentice Justin Courneya, preparing a five-course tasting menu with a special sixth course of strawberry ice cream (Vito Loseto's favourite dessert). Zoltan Szabo and Jimson Bienenstock kept the wine flowing. Seventy-five guests helped the evening raise \$20,000, but by all accounts this dinner was different from the norm, about love and remembrance, warmth and hope, not just about rich people wondering how to spend their money. "The undisputed stars of the show," says Jane O'Hare of the Alzheimer Society of Toronto, "were Lorenzo's little daughters, Marisa and Paolina, who broke all our hearts as they each took the microphone like pros to sing the 'Butterfly Song' (Marisa) and 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow' (Paolina). The event was simply perfect and a testament to Lorenzo and what a hard-working, downright wonderful man he is."