

Globe Toronto

## **Pricey fresh Iberico pork available once more**

SIGNE LANGFORD

14 August 2012

In 2007, Michael Tkaczuk, owner of Toronto-based Serrano Imports, brought a shipment of precious, fresh Iberico pork into Canada. The rare and highly sought-after stuff was quickly snatched up by chefs and gourmards across the country. There was one hitch. As Mr. Tkaczuk explains, he didn't know that the pricey product was subject to a 100-per-cent tariff.

"The result for us was an invoice from Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada about two weeks after we sold out, leaving us with nothing to show for it and, needless to say, we decided to put this project on the shelf."

So foodies once again had to be satisfied with the dried version – jamon Iberico de bellota. Think proscuitto, only nutty, silky, melt-in-the-mouth and steeply priced. At Scheffler's Deli in Toronto's St. Lawrence Market, for example, it sells for \$450 a kilogram.

As Mr. Tkaczuk explains, fresh Iberico pork was being held hostage in a tit-for-tat game played out between the European Union, Canada and the United States. Because the EU refused to import antibiotic-spiked North American beef, it was punished with a tariff at the Canadian border on its fresh pork, rendering imports unfeasible.

However, it seems that Canada now has worked out its differences with the EU and called a ceasefire in the trade war.

What is so special about this meat that Mr. Tkaczuk would spend five years in negotiations with government officials and Spanish producers?

It's sweet and fatty, in the best way possible, with a subtle nuttiness. It's the pigs' diet that sets it apart from every other porker – including current darlings Tamworth and Berkshire. The animals live an idyllic life in the Dehesa or oak forests of southwestern Spain, rooting for plants, shoots and, in the late fall,

almost nothing but nuts or acorns. It's the acorns that give these animals their nutty flavour, incredible marbling and health benefits.

A descendant of an indigenous wild boar, the pata negra (black-footed) or Iberico de bellota (bellota is Spanish for acorn) is referred to by Spanish doctors as a "walking olive tree." It is even prescribed as a health food, since its fat is mostly the good kind (unsaturated) like olive oil. Yes, that's right, North Americans take Lipitor and the Spanish take pork.

Now that the tariff has been lifted, Mr. Tkaczuk is back in the business of importing fresh Iberico de bellota pork. And for the discerning carnivore, it means much lower prices and a larger selection. No more settling for outrageously expensive, paper-thin slices of dried Iberico ham. The fresh version still isn't a bargain, but at \$28.89 a kg for belly to \$93.55 a kg for flank, it's definitely worth a splurge.

Of course, like any hog, one beast produces many cuts, and one of the most special is the Secreto (Spanish for secret). This little cut of incredibly tender, beautifully well-marbled meat hides behind the shoulder blade and had been enjoyed by only the few in the know – until now. One of Mr. Tkaczuk's favourite cuts, it sells for \$89.47 a kg and it – along with several other cuts – is available across Canada through his website ([serranoimports.com](http://serranoimports.com)).