

Going Whole Hog

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When sourcing whole animals for restaurants, chefs recommend talking directly to local farmers. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE AMERICAN PORK BOARD. GRAPHIC: @ISTOCKPHOTO.COM / KEITH BISHOP

Restaurants Embrace Snout To Tail Practices

The two halves of an Ossabaw Island hog are splayed across the wooden kitchen counter of Arlington, Virginia's Green Pig Bistro. Chef-owner Scot Harlan looks over the American heritage breed pig and breaks it down verbally.

"I'm going to make two hams, bacon, and Canadian bacon," he says. "I'll cook the tenderloins for the staff, the bones will go to stock, and the ribs will be cured. Then I'll make scrapple with the head and country terrine with the shoulder. I'm not sure what I'll do with the liver. And we'll have a ton of fatback to play around with."

Though Harlan's restaurant has only been open since early April, it has already earned a reputation for its highly creative snout-to-tail cuisine. The menu showcases such offal-oriented dishes as ox heart Reuben sandwiches, Kung Pao lamb sweetbreads, pig ear tacos, Southern-style chopped chicken livers glazed with maple and bourbon, steak frites with marrow butter, and poutine topped with foie gras and cubes of duck liver. A menu like this proves that you can go snout-to-tail with pretty much any animal—pig, cow, lamb, or fowl.

All across the country—from Portland, Oregon’s Country Cat Dinner House and Bar, Los Angeles’ Animal, and San Francisco’s Incanto to Philadelphia’s Alla Spina and New York City’s Sauce—whole-beast-focused restaurants are proving they’re a cut above the rest. The primal philosophy has found a home in international eateries as well, including St. John in London, which is led by snout-to-tail standard-bearer Fergus Henderson, and The Black Hoof and Parts & Labour, both in Toronto.

Overcoming the fear factor

Convincing diners to try off-cuts can be a tough job for a chef. There’s a fear factor associated with parts like the brain, cheek, and trotters (feet), which are not commonly served in many mainstream American restaurants. What will it taste like? Will the texture be weird? Does it smell funny? Is it unhealthy to consume vital organs or bone?

Jennifer McLagan, author of *Odd Bits: How to Cook the Rest of the Animal*, believes this hesitance mostly comes from unfamiliarity. “We’ve lost touch with where our food comes from, and how a cow isn’t just steaks and chops,” she says. “It’s got a head, feet, a tail, a heart, a liver, lungs, and all these other parts.”

Harlan thinks that the key to winning over diners to offal is putting it in the right context. “Put it in a dish that doesn’t scare them,” he says. “You do poached ox heart salad and you’re not going to sell any. But if you put Thousand Island dressing, Swiss cheese, and sauerkraut on most things, it’ll taste like a Reuben.”

McLagan confirms that the love of a familiar dish can overcome the hesitance to try a new ingredient. “You don’t fry up the brains or serve them a crispy testicle salad,” she says. “Instead, try heart ground up into a burger; brain ravioli; put tongue in a pasta sauce; or make blood ice cream.”

Yes, you read that correctly: Blood ice cream. This sanguine sweet is already popular at restaurants like The Pig in Washington, D.C., which serves a chocolate-blood ice cream in its Sundae Bloody Sundae topped with brandied cherries, bacon-peanut brittle, and gingery whipped cream. It goes to show that offal can even be used for the dessert course—if a creative approach is taken.

On this year’s Cochon 555 tour—a porcine competition celebrating snout-to-tail philosophy—some of founder Brady Lowe’s favorite dishes were the sweet finales. He was particularly impressed with Naomi Pomeroy’s porky chocolate blood pudding topped with cinnamon chicharrones (fried pork rinds) and a dollop of whipped vanilla bean lardo for Portland, Oregon’s Beast. He also liked Kelly English’s doughnut ball filled with blood chocolate ganache, for Memphis, Tennessee’s Restaurant Iris.

For Lowe, creating memorable flavors and winning dishes simply comes down to technique. “It’s the chef’s job to maximize textures, flavors, and products that consumers will enjoy,” he says.

Sometimes, incorporating unfamiliar cuts into familiar dishes isn’t enough. Mark Estee, the chef-owner of Reno, Nevada’s Campo believes chefs need to ease first-time diners into the offal experience.

“Introduce it in small portions at a small price,” he says. “Let people try it and get excited about it.” One of the easiest ways he does this is by offering a board of house-made charcuterie that

might include salami, mortadella (cured pork sausage flecked with fat cubes), terrines (coarse pâté), and rillettes (a style of pâté). Off-cuts are also unobtrusively ground into the hamburger patties and meatballs, and incorporated into the slow-cooked sugo (pasta sauce often made with pork cheeks).

Estee cautions that there can be offal overkill. “I can’t put 11 different off-cuts on the menu at once,” he admits. “That would freak people out.”

There’s also the matter of language. “I know one chef in New York who makes amazing head cheese, but he couldn’t get anyone to eat it,” says Marissa Guggiana, author of *Primal Cuts: Cooking with America’s Best Butchers*. “Then he changed the name to pâté, and suddenly it was getting ordered every night. I’m not advocating being shady, but sometimes giving it a great name helps.”

At Green Pig Bistro, you won’t see any mention of pig ears in the description for the tacos—they’re just crispy pig tacos. “There have been plenty of people who have had them and were told afterwards,” Harlan says. “I don’t feel bad about that. No one has freaked out.”

There’s also a practical reason for his description. “My ambiguity is also so that I can put in pork belly if I’m out of ears,” he says. “That way they’re still crispy pig tacos.”

Bulk savings

Chefs are embracing this primal philosophy for a number of reasons. Estee had an epiphany 12 years ago when he was taking a class on how to break down a pig. “I was looking at a pork tenderloin, which weighs about two pounds, and realizing that it came out of a 100-pound half pig,” he says. “That made me realize there are so many more parts.” His kitchen goes through three pig halves a week and a half cow every other week.

Of course, no matter why chefs started doing it, they all know that there’s one universal upside to snout-to-tail usage: It saves money. Guggiana goes one step further.

“If you have the fortitude and you don’t make too many expensive mistakes, buying whole animal is profitable,” she says.

Or, as Estee puts it: “It’s a lot less expensive to buy half an animal than it is to buy muscles.”

Harlan concurs, since he pays about \$4 a pound for American-heritage pigs sourced from Bev Eggleston’s Ecofriendly Foods in nearby Virginia. Though he’s paying the same amount for the eyes as he is the tenderloin, there are plenty of ways to maximize his profits if he can sell every last bit.

When it comes to sourcing whole animals for restaurants, everyone interviewed for this article recommended getting in touch with local farmers directly. To find producers nearby, consult online directories like Eatwild, onlyGrassfed, and Farmer’s Pal.

Tools of the trade

Though more farmers and purveyors are offering off-cuts, the best way to do snout-to-tail cuisine will always be to do your own butchery in-house. However, the staff will have to be adept at breaking down animals and have the proper tools on hand. A good starter kit would include a few well-sharpened knives (both Guggiana and Harlan recommend Victorinox), a bone saw, a meat grinder, and a sausage stuffer. “And some brute strength,” Estee adds.

Guggiana stresses that it's not about fancy equipment. "You need a game plan," she says. "So, if you get a lamb in, you have to figure out how you're going to use it. Day one, you're going to cut it into primals, then get the loin and rib chop out onto the plate as specials. Day two, you're going to make a sauce, get the bones in stock, and smoke the belly to make lamb bacon. You have to know how you're going to use every part and when."

Once the animals are broken down, it's important to empower your front-of-house staff. "Get your servers on board and let them try things," Guggiana says. "If you're making salumi by hand or spending time and money forming relationships with local farmers, you're going to want to get some return on that. Servers need to know how to share that information with customers."

Staff should be ready to answer commonly asked questions about texture, flavor, smell, and health concerns. The chef can prep them with answers for the first three questions. As far as the latter goes, there's little to suggest that there are adverse affects from eating offal in moderation, as long as the meat is high quality and properly prepared.

Pushing boundaries

Not every offal dish can be renamed or reconfigured to appeal to middle-of-the-road diners. One of the most memorable dishes Lowe ever enjoyed at Cochon 555 was Chris Cosentino's fricola made with stomach, spleen, lung, uterus, and other types of offal. "It was these ribbons of flesh that were dried out and reconstituted to be like noodles," Lowe remembers. "It was finished with brown butter sauce and a mayonnaise made with brain—brainnaise."

At Campo, Estee sometimes offers an Offal Offal Burger—modeled after Reno's signature Awful Awful Burger—made with headcheese, trotters, cow testicles, beef liver, and beef heart. And Harlan recently purchased some blood, so he is thinking of recreating Fergus Henderson's famous recipe for blood cake. "Other people at the restaurant are a little wary about putting it on the menu," he admits, "but I'm going to do it because I want people to try new things, and I know it's delicious."

When working with unorthodox ingredients, sometimes chefs will take diners out of their comfort zones. That's the point, though, McLagan says. "The customer isn't always right," she says. "They need to be challenged a little."