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# THESE LITTLE PIGGIES GO TO MARKET

## Bledsoe Pork

BY ANN MARTIN ROLKE

“Pigs elicit an odd response from people—they don’t like the smell,” John Bledsoe announced as he ushered me into his house in a well-tended subdivision in Woodland. There wasn’t a pig in sight, unless you counted the numerous iron garden sculptures and hand-painted “Pile of Pigs” artwork around the house. The absence of large pigs on the property wasn’t just for the benefit of the neighbors, but also for the pigs themselves. John Bledsoe and his son Dan raise organic pigs—without the use of hormones or antibiotics—and they can’t afford to have anyone new exposing their animals to infection.

The result of this careful animal husbandry is evident every weekend at the Davis and Sacramento farmers’ markets, where you’ll find John and Dan selling their delicious “power pork” direct to lucky locals. John calls it that because it has a lot of flavor per ounce, and you’ll find Bledsoe pork listed on some of the best area restaurant menus, including Mulvaney’s Building & Loan and Roxy.

“We really have a passion for what we’re doing,” John says. “We work the way we do because it’s not just a pig to us.” They see these animals as a part of a sustainable whole that includes the environment, their customers’ health, and even a bit of pig karma. He continues, “We’ve learned that pigs are very smart, so we’re very cautious about how we treat them.”

Surprisingly, this successful business began four years ago, with a single show pig. Dan Bledsoe was in FFA (Future Farmers of America) in high school and raised a champion Duroc breed pig for the state fair. Shortly thereafter, he and his father began a breeding program with two or three sows. Now they have upwards of eighty. Before specializing in pigs, John was an agriculture consultant, so he had well-formed opinions on what kind of product would sell the best.

“We made the decision to make a clean meat product because people really want to know what’s in their food these days,” he says. He’s even more certain of that now that he meets his customers at the markets. With an increase in food allergies and theories that diet can help some children with autism, natural meats are gaining more mainstream popularity. John has also noted some unusual requests for pig liver. Apparently it’s particularly high in iron and many women with anemia look for pig liver to rebalance their iron levels. John recounts, “We’ve grown huge families at the markets as we talk with customers and they want that direct connection with their food. When someone doesn’t come to the market, you worry about them.”

The Bledsoe pork business is a family operation all around.

In addition to son Dan, John has two daughters, an adopted son, and his wife of 34 years, Rosemary. David, the adopted son, was a student of Rosemary’s and came to visit for a few days, but ended up staying. “If you make it three days around here, you’re hooked,” John jokes. (Turns out that’s how long it took their dog Zack to latch on as well.) All of them help in the business in one way or another, except Zack. It seems that “dogs grow wings” if you try to use them to work pigs; the pigs throw them up in the air and that’s the end of that experiment.

Joking aside, John is very serious about how he treats his animals. He equates a pig with a human in temperament; that is, if you’re nice to the pigs and don’t hurt them, they’re not afraid of



you. Since the Bledsoes don’t give their pigs immunizations, they don’t have to manhandle the animals much. And it’s important that they have room to graze—both for the benefit of the pigs and the land. “The mamas have got to move while they’re pregnant,” John says. “Movement is a grand key to life.” It makes the pork better tasting and helps keep the animals from developing some of the infections that they can get when they’re confined. In addition, this keeps the waste from forming into a “lagoon” as it’s called in the business. With the pigs moving about, they can

spread their waste more evenly and work it into the ground, adding nutrients to the soil. Lagoons are a major environmental issue these days, especially in the beef business. Runoff contaminates the water system and costs farmers a lot of money to control.

So this natural approach to raising pigs has a lot of thought behind it. Without the push of added hormones, the Bledsoe pigs grow for eight or nine months before they are butchered, versus the six-month limit often used in larger operations. Not only does this improve flavor but, "I'm really worried about women eating meat with hormones and other drugs," John says. He points out the high rate of breast cancer (especially in Northern California) and the reports that there may be a link between eating hormones in food and their affect on the body.

Books like *The Omnivore's Dilemma* by UC Berkeley professor Michael Pollan and *Blithe Tomato* by Yolo farmer Mike Madison have put people into farmers' markets perhaps like never before. It's a social experience as well as a practical one these days. Customers at the markets are increasingly concerned with the humane treatment of animals, what's used on their produce, and how far it was shipped before they bought it. While some may see this as a bit elitist, it has become a significant movement in the world of farming. Especially in the way that the Bledsoes run their business, they skip the middleman and go straight to the customers, giving them the advantage of knowing exactly what people want and why.

While the Bledsoes and other organic farmers currently can't produce enough pork to satisfy the demand within 100 miles, John sees that changing. "I envision Yolo County having 2000 to 3000 sows for the local market. Now there probably aren't 500 in that area, and a lot of those are show pigs," he says. He and Dan give their boars to other local producers to insure the future availability of the Duroc breed that they prefer. He also hopes that their operation might expand to chickens, beef, lamb, and even turkeys.

"The business every week is gaining momentum," he reports. "I'm at the maximum production now though, so instead of hiring people to increase output, I have to become more sophisticated." He and Dan are looking for the right property in the area to develop for the future—one isolated enough not to cause

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problems with smell or waste so that they can continue to raise the animals they way they like. "I'm amazed at how fast we're growing without doing any advertising," John says, although testimonials like the July article in the *Sacramento News & Review* do much to promote their products, even causing a run on hot dogs that wiped out a month's supply in one weekend.

Widely available to capital-area diners, they have recently expanded to at least one restaurant in St. Helena, but it's a slow process. "When we add a new customer, we have to agonize because we don't want to get started

and then stub a toe," John admits. Instead, they like to know the customers they have and give them cooking advice with their purchases. Since John has been recommending pork shoulder as "the tastiest of all the cuts," he's seen a marked increase in requests for it. He also has people order whole legs to make their own hams and pork bellies so they can home-cure bacon.

The Bledsoes have definitely found an appreciative audience in the Sacramento area and vow to continue producing top-quality organic pork at a good price. "Our beliefs have been tempered with time," John says. "But when it's all said and done, I know people really like our pork chops."

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