

Parsing Pork

Who is actually raising the hogs? Is it itinerant workers living in confined quarters themselves, or is the family who owns the animals the primary source of labor on the farm? At the same time it is also important to know that smaller family farmers are not all employing sustainable and humane husbandry practices. Many legitimate family farmers have given up raising their animals the old fashioned way, and, convinced that they must “modernize” to survive, have built small-scale hog confinement barns with liquid manure systems. If they are going to make less money per hog, they have been convinced, then they will need to greatly increase production; and once they’ve spent the money on such a mini-factory, they need to keep it full.

Free range or free roaming. While there is no USDA regulation of these terms, federal standards allow food products to carry the “free range” or “free roaming” label so long as producers have demonstrated that the animal “has been allowed access to the outside.” An animal given “access” to the outdoors, but which remains inside or ventures out only to a concrete slab, can still be labeled “free-range.” If you are told that pork is free range, ask where the pigs live and perhaps more importantly, where their mothers live: were the pigs born into confinement or were they raised from the start in humane and sustainable conditions?

Organic. Organic agriculture is rooted in a system of production that promotes management practices that restore and maintain ecological harmony while minimizing the use of off-farm inputs. In organic animal agriculture, now regulated by the USDA, pork certified as organic comes from animals have been raised without the use of antibiotics or other drugs. They also must have been raised

entirely on certified organic feed, and have outdoor “access.” Access doesn’t assure that animals have in fact been raised on pasture, or that they receive adequate exercise, fresh air and sunshine. Since the USDA took over the organic program, some controversy has been created over the issue of lax enforcement of access-to-pasture provisions. Other small family farmers have opted out of organic certification because they are unwilling to let the industrially-influenced USDA dictate their farming practices. However, in general, organic pork is raised to a high standard.

Transparency and “dual purpose” companies. As the market for premium and sustainable pork grows, more and more companies want to enter this market. Simply claiming to be “natural” and “humane” does not necessarily mean that someone needs to make a change in their practices. And claiming to be family farmed is dependent on your corporate structure. Becoming antibiotic-free requires some new sanitation procedures, but little other change in husbandry practices. For many of these companies, their primary business is running CAFO’s and may have dedicated a small part of their production to a higher standard. These companies often go one step further: presenting themselves as if that is the **only** business they are in. If you care about supporting only enterprises who are committed to sustainable agriculture and family farming, you will want to avoid these companies. But you’ll have to ask; they won’t volunteer the information. It is important to ask questions like “What other businesses are you in?” “Is 100% of your meat produced to these standards?” and “Who owns your company?”

The greatest success story in the meat industry over the past fifty years was the growth in the sales of chicken. By treating chickens as “production units,” crowding as many as possible into windowless barns, and automating every step of the process from birth to box, prices were greatly reduced and chicken became the most popular meat in the U.S. In the ‘90’s, the U.S. pork industry decided to follow suit. Massive factory farms (or CAFO’s – concentrated animal feeding operations) and smaller mini-factories were built and buyouts concentrated the industry in a few companies’ hands. Marketing pork as the “other white meat,” the industry developed new cross-breeds that produced leaner pork and were also easier to raise in indoor confinement under these more “efficient” conditions.

Pork is big business. For the four companies that supply 60% of the nation’s pork, hogs are not sentient creatures, and our environment is for someone else to worry about. Cost is everything. Animal welfare advocates point out that pigs are highly intelligent, social animals, and have a demonstrated ability to suffer not only physically but mentally. But business is business, and these companies are focused on driving down costs by:

- 1) *maximizing the number of animals per square foot;*
- 2) *eliminating the need for husbandry skills among workers (allowing low-wage immigrant labor to do the work); and*
- 3) *minimizing the number of workers*

To do this, sows in factory breeding operations are permanently confined in crates, unable to walk or even turn around. All pigs are denied bedding in

order that their manure can be liquefied for easy handling; this liquefaction makes it possible to concentrate huge numbers of animals on one site. Untreated liquefied manure runs into streams, seeps into groundwater and emits toxic gases, with environmental and public health consequences. Many of these factories pour out more raw sewage than the a medium-sized city; however, no law requires a sewage treatment facility for such a “farm.”

The Family Farm is Disappearing. Industrial hog producers have been successful in lowering prices. Because of the massive volume they produce, they can also lower the profit margin on each hog sold. This has meant that lower-volume, independent family farmers have been driven out of business, further decimating the culture of husbandry that once characterized American farming - a culture that was the backbone of rural communities and treated both animals and the environment with respect. In the 1950’s, there were more than 1 million American farmers raising hogs. In 2002, the USDA reported that there were 75,350 - yet these actually produced over 100 million hogs, more than in the 1950’s. Of these hog “operations,” just 2,258 produced more than 10 million hogs, or 53% of the nation’s total.

In the crowded conditions of a hog factory, disease control is critical, leading to widespread routine feeding of antibiotics which have the additional feature of promoting growth of piglets and sow productivity. The *World Health Organization* (WHO) has identified the routine, non-therapeutic use of antibiotics in agriculture as a major contributor to antibiotic resistance in humans.

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“2002 Census of Agriculture”, USDA. See also “Economic and Structural Relationships in U.S. Hog Production”, William D. McBride & Nigel Key, U.S.D.A. Agricultural Economic Report No. 818

Joint WHO/FAO/OIE Expert Workshop on Non-human Antimicrobial Usage and Antimicrobial Resistance, Geneva, 1-5 December 2003. Available at: <http://www.who.int/foodsafety/micro/meetings/nov2003/en/>

Humane Protocols

There have been several efforts to set third-party standards for hog husbandry. The earliest of these was the Animal Welfare Institute (AWI), which has what many believe to be the strictest code for hog husbandry. A broad array of groups endorsed this protocol in 2002 at a press conference in New York City. Included in this group were Waterkeepers Alliance, Chefs Collaborative, Earthpledge, Slow Food, and GRACE. AWI's critics have said it may not have enough detail in its protocol; AWI counters by saying that as any protocol grows longer it is going to be unmanageable for a family farmer, so they seek to cover the crucial matters, and not fill it with obvious requirements like "pigs must have access to water."

That said, the AWI protocol has grown to ten pages long, and covers the most important aspects of humanely raising pigs. It requires that each farm must be a family farm, with the family owning the pigs, managing the pigs, and providing most of the daily labor. Most importantly, AWI's protocol applies to each and every pig produced from approved farms – sows, boars, and growing and finishing pigs.

Another program, Certified Humane, has come to prominence in the past several years. It is a modified version of Great Britain's RSPCA's "Free-Farmed" protocol, and shares many components of the AWI program. Critics of Certified Humane's program are troubled by its shortfalls in several crucial areas:

◦ *The Certified Humane program allows tail docking (cutting off of pigs' tails), which is done to prevent pigs from biting each others' tails. However, critics feel, if pigs are raised in natural, roomy environments, they will not bite each other's tails.*

◦ *The Certified Humane program allows farrowing crates and does not require bedding for pregnant sows. The urge to build a nest is the single strongest instinct of a near-birth sow. Confining a pregnant sow in a slotted-floor cage is not allowed by any other legitimate humane husbandry program.*

◦ *The Certified Humane program allows piglets to be removed from their mothers (weaned) at twenty-one days, about twice*

as early as other animal welfare groups require.

◦ *The Certified Humane program will endorse a company's pork even if only a portion of their production is humane. The largest supplier they have endorsed, is in fact one of the largest factory-hog producers in Canada, with 1.4 million square feet of pig facilities - the majority of which is in factory-like confinement, along with a 700,000 hog per year slaughterhouse and several other businesses. That a small percentage of the offspring of their caged sows are then raised in barns with bedding and room to roam, and labeled "natural," does not qualify them for the endorsement of any organization except Certified Humane.*

Claims vs. Reality

As consumers have become aware of the realities of industrial livestock practices, a growing market has developed for alternatives to factory-produced pork. As this market has developed, so too have the number of companies claiming to offer alternatives, many of which retain the characteristics of the factory. Not surprisingly, many companies are making the cynical decision that it is cheaper to claim to be sustainable, or to make a few gestures in the direction of sustainability, than to make a wholehearted commitment to it. In this environment, understanding the various claims that are made and learning to ask the questions that get at the issues you care about will help you find out what these purveyors won't say. Here is a guide to various claims and how to see through the words to the reality:

Natural. According to the USDA, meat can be labeled as "all natural" if it is "minimally processed and contains no artificial ingredients" such as MSG or sodium phosphates. The USDA's "all natural" label is a minimum standard - it doesn't exclude meats raised using growth hormones or antibiotics as growth promoters, and it has no criteria regarding animal husbandry or sustainable practices. In fact, according to the USDA, any fresh meat that has not been proc-

essed is defined as "natural." And many factory producers from chicken to pork, now tout themselves as "all natural."

Antibiotic-free. Some companies that claim to antibiotic free say this only means that there is no antibiotic residue in the pork; i.e. the hogs weren't fed antibiotics within their last few weeks of life. Others will claim to be antibiotic-free but mean no antibiotics were used after weaning. Due to demand from chains such as Whole Foods, many companies are however offering pork from hogs that were in fact never fed antibiotics in their feed or water supply. While treating animals who get sick is humane, these chains feel the consumer will appreciate a stronger "no antibiotics" claim. But being antibiotic free does not mean they weren't raised in factories, as "pathogen-free" environments have been created within confinement systems to reduce the likelihood of disease outbreaks. These practices, while more sanitary, are otherwise no different from any other CAFO.

Humane. Pigs are highly intelligent, social animals, with strong mothering instincts, who suffer greatly in the isolated, controlled conditions of CAFOs. At the same time, there is no legal definition of "humane," and many CAFOs have claimed they use only "humane" practices. In fact, no CAFO has agreed that its practices were inhumane. So when

choosing pork, just asking for "humanely-raised" may not get at the problem. You'll need to investigate further. In doing so, it is important to understand that welfare begins with the treatment of the mother sow – because it is there that the worst practices exist. Was she confined to crates? Did she and her piglets have the ability to exhibit their natural behaviors such as nesting and playing. There are several organizations setting standards for humane husbandry practices. Several have been set up by the meat industry, to disguise the nature of factory production practices. (Also see sidebar for details on the standards of two animal welfare organizations.)

Premium and special breeds. In its effort to compete with chicken, the pork industry has created a number of lean cross-breeds that can survive when raised in confinement systems. Recognizing the demand from chefs and gourmets, some companies are now beginning to offer alternatives: juicier, fatter breeds of pork. These include Smithfield's "Prime Pork," Sysco's "White Marble Farms," Agri Beef's "Kurobuta Pork," Berkshire Gold, Niman Ranch, Heritage Foods USA, and others. Smithfield has developed its own genetics, to produce more marbled pork; Sysco is using more marbled breeds while Agri Beef and Berkshire Gold are using purebred Berkshire

hogs. Niman Ranch uses crossbreeds of Berkshires and other premium breeds and selects its pork based on blind taste tests (along with husbandry practices). Heritage Foods USA offers pork from several varieties of purebred heritage hogs. Choosing the best-tasting pork once meant it probably came from a hog raised humanely and sustainably by a family farmer. Unfortunately, today, CAFOs are producing more flavorful pork using the same antibiotics and confinement conditions they use with their lean pork, in an effort to win back the business they have been losing to new suppliers and to family farmers. Better-tasting pork is no longer a guarantee of sustainable and humane husbandry practices.

Family farmers. The term family farmer clearly resonates with the public. And everyone wants to use it. Until a few years ago, the third-largest pork conglomerate in America was Murphy Family Farms. It is true that it was owned by a single, very rich, family until it was acquired by Smithfield. Today, the Canadian conglomerate duBreton claims: "Family Farmed Since 1944." As the American family farmer is squeezed off the land, many of those buying their land are legally justified in calling their business a family business, if they are privately held by members of the same family. The more important questions to ask are: Who is actually doing the farming?