

HIGH CLASS HOGS



Adapting to the changing market demands, one couple saves their family farm by selling niche pork to high-end restaurants across the nation

Story and photos by Kaitlin Morgan

Twenty-five years ago, Good Farms of Olsburg, Kan., was on the leading edge of seedstock swine production. But everything changed in the late 1990s when the industry made a shift in production style. Once selling 225 Duroc-Yorkshire boars annually, Kansas State University alumni Craig and Amy Good found themselves struggling just to market 50 boars.

Despite their passion for the swine operation they built, the couple was faced with the challenge of either quitting the hog business or making a drastic change to their operation.

Craig visited with Vincent Amanor-Boadu, professor of agribusiness economics and management, who was working in one of K-State's agricultural innovation centers. Amanor-Boadu had been consulting with Heritage Foods USA, a new company from New York

City specializing in marketing the products of small, family farms to chefs in high-end restaurants across the nation. He suggested the Goods find a new market for their hogs.

Thus, the relationship between Good Farms and Heritage Foods and their founders Patrick Martins and Todd Wickstrom began. The Goods now market approximately 900 pigs per year through Heritage Foods.

"The number of people out there who are looking for high-quality, sustainable, fair food is growing every day," Martins says.

Good Farms is a farrow-to-finish operation, but not in commercial terms. Pigs spend the majority of their life in outdoor pens and hoop barns. The only indoor production is during farrowing and weaning.

"Times have changed, and we had to adapt our operation to meet that change," Craig says.

Diversity Done Right

Craig and Amy eventually sold off their Yorkshire breeding stock and began raising Durocs. They built an operation that strives to provide consumers with "the tastiest, most wholesome, healthiest pork, raised in a traditional manner."

Diversity of breeds and management styles has strengthened his business by listening to the wants of his customers and providing them with the pork they request.

"I think one important thing for today's market is breed diversity because every breed brings something different to the table," Amy says. "Each one has different characteristics, certain cuts on some breeds are better than others, and in the market we're in, that's what the chefs are after."

About five years ago, Craig says Heritage Foods kept asking him to raise a breed more rare than the Duroc. Next, seven

Gloucestershire Old Spot sows and a boar joined the operation.

“They’re fatter, lighter muscled and fine-boned,” Craig says. “Their fat is a creamy smooth fat, and the meat is fine textured, and tender.”

While this old English breed isn’t popular among U.S. produce, it is a favorite among the chefs that serve Good Farms pork. After two years, Heritage Foods called Craig to say it wanted to ramp up production of the Spots, because the chefs thought it was the “best pork they had ever eaten.”

Craig explains carrying a diverse, but breed-specific, selection of pork is a marketing opportunity for the Heritage Foods chefs, creating interest and drawing guests into their restaurant for a rare experience.

Chefs are now making connections with their food and agriculture, using the menu to tell a story to their consumers and casting Good Farms as a main character.

A Quality Challenge

“Every package of pork that goes out is traceable back to our farm,” Craig says. “We’re the first step in that food chain and I think that’s something as a producer we must always think of. The producer, the packing plants and the consumer all go together. If we don’t get it right then it’s hard for the rest of them to succeed down the road.”

Beyond selecting high-quality genetics, Craig has used different

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feedstuffs such as plums, cranberries and even milk from a Jersey cow to add value to his pigs. The different feeds change characteristics of the meat and fat, offering a new eating experience for consumers.

Creating a Connection

While educating consumers with little background of the swine industry can sometimes be challenging, both Amy and Craig agree that meeting and connecting with the chefs has been the most rewarding part of their experience.

“People in agriculture need to be more willing to open their homes and operations to educate people about what we do,” Amy says. “When we got to talk with our customers one-on-one, we were able to explain

what agriculture was all about and tell them about what we are doing and why we love it.”

Craig and Amy have been invited to travel to New York to visit the restaurants they supply. Both say they can’t stress enough how appreciated they feel just because they listen to the chefs and do their best to produce the kind of product they request.

Throughout the whole experience, Craig says he has learned an important lesson in business practice; one we should all give more attention. “What business can be truly successful without listening to their customers?” **KS**



The Gloucestershire Old Spots were once used to clean apple orchards in England.

