

FEATURE

ON YOUR PLATE
In a Pig's Eye

*A Porcine Perspective
on Pork Production*

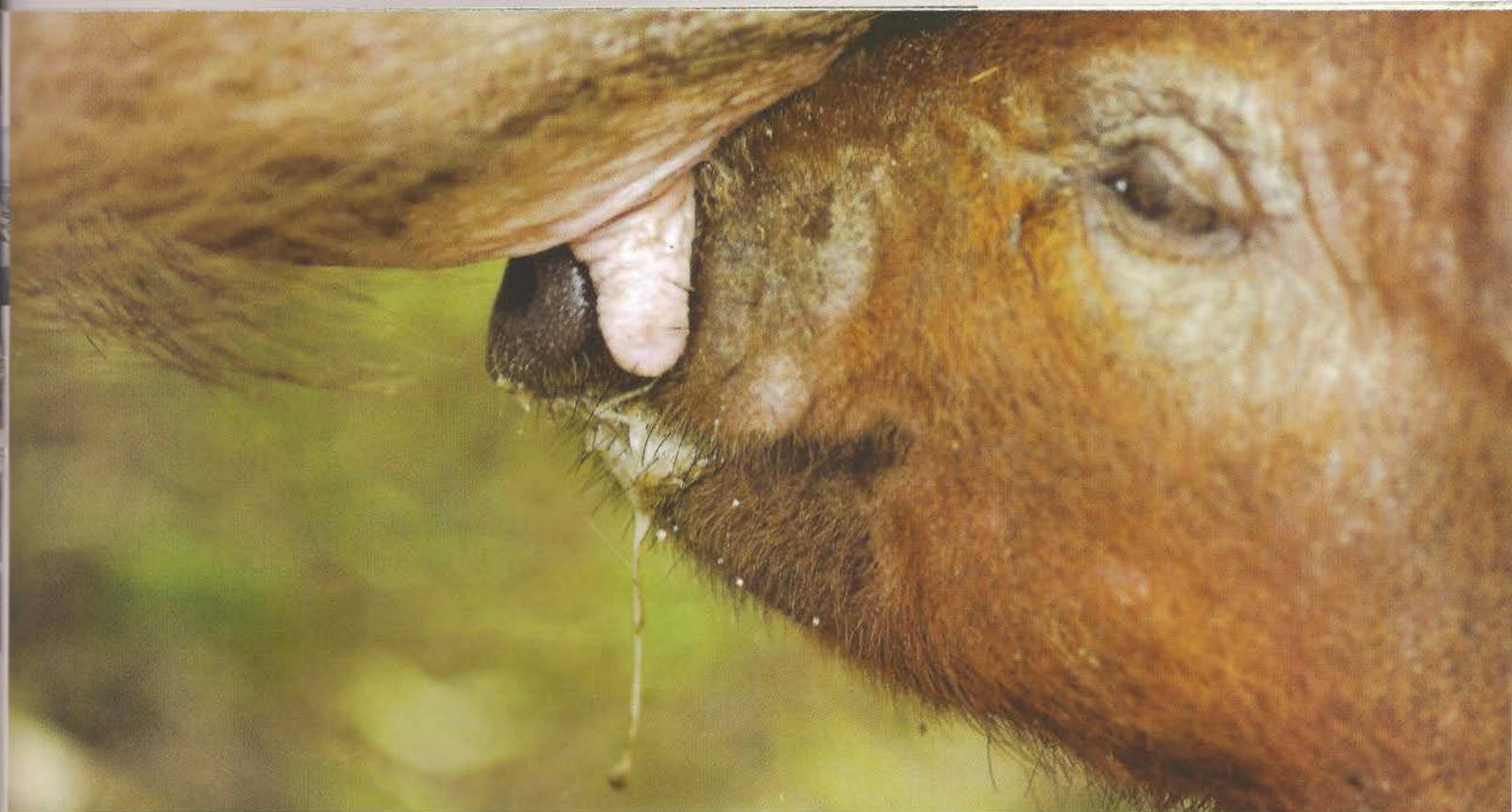
"How we eat determines, to a considerable extent, how the world is used."

Eating with the fullest pleasure—pleasure, that is, that does not depend on ignorance—is perhaps the most profound enactment of our connection with the world. In this pleasure we experience and celebrate our dependence and our gratitude, for we are living from mystery, from creatures we did not make and powers we cannot comprehend.—Wendell Berry

We are not merely consumers but rather participants in the agricultural process.

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PIGS AND HUMANS SHARE A surprising number of attributes. Both species are by nature social creatures choosing to live in groups for comfort and mutual safety. Both form friendships and relationships with those around them including members of other species. Like human mothers, sows nurture their young with milk, warmth and love while protecting them from danger. Piglets, like children, enjoy playing with toys and one another—wrestling, rolling down hills, running and leaping. Pigs prefer a diverse diet, and are even similar in size and weight to adult humans. Their pink, mostly exposed skin resembles human flesh more than most animals', and, like us, they dream and see colors. Pigs also have perhaps the most complex set of domestic animal vocal sounds: researchers have identified more than 20 distinct categories that include greeting, distress, separation, excitement, aggression, fear, pain and so forth. Studies show that pigs are intelligent, and researchers have even taught some to play video games. Donald Broom, Ph.D., Professor of Animal Welfare at Cambridge University's Veterinary School, claims that pigs' cognitive capacity is similar to that of a 3-year-old human child. More and more American families are keeping pigs as pets, and many animal experts believe they are easier to train than dogs. Everyday observations strongly suggest that each pig, like every person, has a unique personality and a distinct self.

Still, Americans eat over 100 million pigs every year, and many seem unconcerned that sentient animals are killed under the most inhumane conditions to make the ham, pork chops, bacon, sausages and bologna they buy in supermarkets. Worse yet, many, if not most, may not even be aware that over 90% of pigs come from factory farms that produce meat more cheaply by raising and processing animals in assembly-line fashion. Yet if pigs experience emotions and feelings akin to those of humans, and if each pig is an individual, don't we have some ethical duty toward them? Given that it is not even necessary for humans to

eat pigs (or any other animal for that matter) aren't we obliged to at least consider what they might want, given a choice?

Animal rights advocates argue that since humans can derive complete and adequate protein from plant-based sources (e.g., nuts, beans, grains, soy, etc.), no animal should be killed for food. "At Farm Sanctuary, animals are our friends not our food," said Gene Bauston, president of Farm Sanctuary, America's leading farm animal rescue and protection organization. "Getting to know pigs and other farm animals, and recognizing that they feel pain and suffering as well as friendship and joy, just like other animals, leads many of our visitors to adopt vegan lifestyles."

However, as long as most consumers still choose to eat meat, it is important they have options that are better for farmed animals. As proprietor of the Wild Outback Ranch in Bend, Oregon, Brian Brown makes this option available. He represents that rare breed of farmer who provides his animals with a high quality of life while they are alive. "I strive to create surroundings where pigs can express their natural behaviors," he said. "To be happy, pigs need soil, sunlight, social opportunities, room to roam, and places to explore. I try to gear the environment toward meeting the physical and social needs that evolution has hardwired into the species."

Compared to the vast majority of factory pig farms, Wild Outback Ranch is a virtual pastoral paradise. Farmer Brown's herd of 60 or so pigs shares 440 acres of pasture with dozens of other animals, including cows, horses, goats, chickens, sheep and a donkey. Their environment is one that allows nature to provide for basic needs: mud ponds for cooling off, shade trees, and dirt in which to forage for plants and insects. The pigs eat a healthy diet of corn and cereal grains, alfalfa, fruits, vegetables and cow's milk. They enjoy sleeping together on earth and straw in a large roofed burrow at night, and doze in small groups throughout the day. New mothers are free to build smaller nests for their newborn piglets in separate shelters, and then return to the group a few weeks later with babies in tow. This arrangement allows the

piglets to learn first from their mothers and later from other herd members how to be pigs.

Pigs in factory farms live in an entirely different world. Rather than a few dozen hogs living mostly outdoors, a factory farm may cram up to 12,000 pigs together in a single enclosed building the size of a football field. There are no straw nests or mud puddles here—only hard concrete and cold metal for pigs to stand and lie on, often in their own excrement. This is especially degrading to pigs because, despite contrary notions, they are by nature very clean animals who never soil their eating or sleeping areas when given a choice.

The process starts with the breeding sows, who, rather than being allowed to build nests during pregnancy and nursing, are confined in gestation crates that are so narrow they can't even turn around in them. No exercise or nesting is possible even though the urge for such behavior is strong. When born, rather than enjoying the warmth and security of their mother's body, piglets are only allowed to take milk from their mother through the steel bars of yet another restrictive cage known as a farrowing stall. Three to four weeks after the piglets are born, they are taken from their mothers and shipped to a "finishing" facility where they are fed a high-protein diet spiked with hormones to accelerate their growth so they can be slaughtered at just six months of age. Until that time, they receive antibiotics that will keep them well enough to live out their short lives in their filthy and unhygienic surroundings. As intelligent creatures, pigs raised in crowded, artificial conditions naturally get bored and stressed, and typically take their frustrations out on each other. Therefore, to prevent the pigs from biting one another's tails off (thus increasing the risk of blood infection) it is standard practice on factory farms to dock their tails and clip their teeth, all without anesthesia.

Having provided a natural environment conducive to their inherent natural tendencies, Brown has no need to mutilate his animals (though he does castrate most of the males to control

breeding). Growing up on his family's farm in Tualatin, Oregon, Brown learned to respect the complexity of pig society; he understands that each pig is an individual whose feelings matter. As a species, pigs have unique ways of expressing their likes and dislikes. They grunt when they are happy, and even wag their tails like dogs when excited. Pigs also enjoy hanging out with people and being petted. They are very tactile animals who love physical contact, especially belly rubs. The pigs like to be around Brown while he works the farm. He enjoys their company in turn and gives names to his favorites.

Of course, there is one catch for all of the animals living it up at the Ranch: they will die before their time. When the non-breeding pigs are about a year old, they are killed on the ranch by professional meatpackers, quickly and in a relatively humane manner. They are then trucked to a local slaughterhouse, butchered, and turned into pork products. How does Brown feel about his living being dependent on ending their lives? "Pigs are part of the life of the farm, so when the time comes, we have to let them go. But it matters to me that while they were alive, they lived like pigs are supposed to."

Farmer Brown sees himself as part of a long sustainable stewardship tradition going back at least 10,000 years to the beginning of the agricultural revolution when humans first began domesticating animals for food. He even encourages conscientious omnivores to visit Wild Outback Ranch "to see where their meat comes from and make a connection with the animals—see what kind of life they have here." You'd be hard pressed to find any factory farm offering a similar invitation. If you are concerned about animal welfare but don't feel quite ready to make the leap to vegetarianism, there are still actions you can take to help animals. For example, you can choose to eat less meat, and you can support farms that raise free-range animals.

For more information about Wild Outback Ranch, contact Brian Brown at (541) 788-6194 or wildoutbackranch@hotmail.com.

Factory Made Pigs

Like the veal producers, hog farmers place a premium on crowding to get the most production using the least possible space. To meet the continuous demand of factories, producers must maintain hundreds of breeding sows.

Day In The Life

In the U.S., pigs are typically not tethered as they are in Europe. Instead, they are continuously confined in tight individual stalls for the vast majority of their productive lives—three to five years. The stall is approximately 2 feet wide, 7 feet long and 3 feet high. No exercise or nesting is possible even though the urge for such behavior is strong. About a week before her piglets are born, the pregnant sow is moved to a farrowing stall. This steel cage allows her only to stand or lie down and keeps her in position to feed her baby pigs.

Piglets are crowded into "nurseries," small wire cages that can be stacked on top of each other. Their tails are cut off (docked) and their ears notched for identification. When they are about three weeks old they are removed to another part of the factory to be fattened for market.

The mother is immediately re-impregnated and sent back to the gestation stall to begin the cycle all over again. Such a system allows a great many sows to be housed in an environmentally controlled situation while being fed and cared for by a minimal and unskilled labor force.

"May I urge you to consider my liver?" Asked the animal, "it must be very rich and tender by now, I've been force-feeding myself for months."

—Restaurant at the End of the Universe, by Douglas Adams



Illustration by: Trevor Meredith

