



KEVIN GILLESPIE

More than once in my career, I have found myself on the receiving end of the question, "What is your favorite thing to cook?" It surprises most people when I don't have an answer, but I've never been able to come up with a good response because, as a chef, I'm allowed endless opportunity to cook just about anything you could dream of, thus it is reasonably hard to pick just one thing.

Recently, after some deep thought, I finally feel I have an honest answer: pork. It seems so clear to me now that I'm not sure why I sidestepped the question for so long. I have, for

KEY INGREDIENTS quite some time now, dedicated my cooking career to understanding the often misunderstood animal and finding ways to utilize what I have quickly discovered to be the most utilitarian of all proteins. Long the choice for some of the world's most highly regarded delicacies, pork has definitely spent its share of time in the limelight, from Iberico ham and Prosciutto di Parma, to the luscious barbecue that Southerners have practically built a religion around. However, in this country, pork's beauty has often been masked by rather negative blanket statements about its supposed lack of flavor and healthfulness. Both rumors can trace their origin to the commercial meat industry and the feed-lot style of raising animals.

Years ago, before big agriculture ruled the dinner table, pork was bred and enjoyed for its deep flavor and overabundance of rich, savory fat. It is this fat that Southerners have long cherished for making the most tender biscuits and flakiest pie crust around. Yet eventually the genetics of these animals were manipulated to produce something leaner and thus "healthier," an unfortunate trend in the food sciences of America for the better part of the 20th century. Only recently have ranchers and chefs, alongside food scientists, animal activists and preservationists, actively devoted exhaustive hours to resurrecting our "heritage breed" pigs and making them available to the public.

A heritage breed is one that has not been crossbred or scientifically altered from the way Mother Nature intended. These animals have often been extremely close to extinction, finding only a handful of farmers wishing to continue raising an animal that has proven to be significantly less profitable than others. I find myself filled with inspiration when our hogs from Gum Creek Farms arrive, and I cannot wait to dive into them. The meat pairs well with just about anything you can think of, and yet it always has the ability to stand out. These are the pigs that we as chefs need to embrace and

feature in our menus. These are the pigs that as diners, you find yourself in awe of their complex flavor and delightful juiciness. And these are the pigs that we as humanitarians must demand, because the only way to keep these animals around is to eat them. It sounds somewhat illogical, but by our demand we ensure their continued existence. I encourage each person to seek out restaurants using these animals and to shop at grocery stores and farmers markets where they are available.

One of my favorite things to do with pork is to make my own bacon. While this is a rather long process, it is unbelievably simple and demands only a minimal time commitment from the cook. I promise, for those brave enough to make their own bacon, you'll never go back. **SP**

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MAKE YOUR OWN BACON

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 5-pound slab pork belly
- 2 teaspoons sodium nitrite
- 3 tablespoons kosher salt
- 2 tablespoons dark brown sugar
- 2 tablespoons coarsely ground black pepper
- ¼ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ¼ teaspoon ground cloves
- 1 teaspoon espilette or cayenne pepper

INSTRUCTIONS:

Combine all spices and rub the mixture evenly over all surfaces of the pork belly and wrap tightly with plastic wrap until completely sealed. Allow the mixture to settle into the meat by laying it in a pan in your fridge and flipping it over daily for 15 days. It should be rather firm at this point and will have released its own liquid. Unwrap the package, and rinse under cold water and pat dry. Allow the belly to sit uncovered in your fridge for an additional two days, flipping it over each day. Place belly in a smoker, and smoke at 160 degrees F. until it's a deep amber color and very firm. Remove, and cool to room temperature. Rewrap in plastic, and use within two weeks.

