

Time to push pedigree?

Slow Food and the Rare Breeds Survival Trust want to see more products made with pedigree, native breed meat. MICK WHITWORTH found out why.

Last month saw Slow Food's UK arm introduce the 100th traditional food to its Ark of Taste, the catalogue of endangered heritage products with close links to their regions.

The British Saddleback Pig is a hardy, dual purpose pork and bacon animal that is classified as "at risk" by the Rare Breeds Survival Trust (RBST), with only around 500 breeding sows.

It is an ingredient in many artisan charcuterie products, but both the RBST and Slow Food want to see much more native or rare breed meat on menus and retail shelves. They also want more buyers insisting on traceable, pedigree meat from registered stock, rather than just named breeds such as 'Dexter beef'.

Last month, the two hosted a conference at the Prince of Wales' Highgrove estate in Gloucestershire to press home this message to farmers, breeders, butchers and opinion-formers, saying: "This fundamental point will ensure the viability and integrity of gene pools of some of our rarest breeds."

Libby Henson, whose father started the RBST in the 1970s, told delegates: "There are real differences in the tastes of these breeds, but to save this diversity we need to eat them. They are livestock breeds and you have to create a market for them."

Henson is a director of Grassroots Systems, whose software supports over 100 British livestock breed societies. She said the concept of "breed-named produce" was established in the public mind and commanded a premium, but its use in marketing was so widespread it was being



Caron Kennedy-Stewart of Clash Farm can provide pedigree certification for her new British Saddleback chorizo and salami

undermined by misleading or vague descriptions. One pub she visited was offering "traditional Tudor beef" and told her it was "very special, ancient breed" before admitting it had made the name up. When Burger King sells "Angus" beef, the description only means the bull was an Aberdeen Angus; the parent cow might have been any breed.

"This is exactly the battle organic producers have been fighting, and the battle we are fighting too," Henson said, pointing out that the pedigree system offered a guarantee of provenance. "If the [named breed] concept has no integrity, the public will turn away from it."

One newcomer to charcuterie that offers this guarantee is Clash Farm in Dumfries & Galloway, Scotland's largest pedigree pork producer. It supplies British Saddleback to top restaurants including The Kitchen in Leith and Chez Roux at Greywalls, and co-owner Caron Kennedy-Stewart told FFD her catering wholesaler insisted on seeing pedigree certification.

Clash Farm has now diversified into salami

and chorizo to gain the advantage of longer shelflife and ambient storage.

Kennedy-Stewart said she always promoted the unique qualities of the British Saddleback. But with rare-breed pigs taking twice as long to reach top weight as commercial equivalents, she said they were also twice as expensive. Getting consumers to understand the difference was a challenge.

Some speakers at last month's event argued the 'registered stock' message was too complex for consumers. It was up to the trade to ensure the integrity of what was being sold.

Welsh farmer and charcutier Iltud Dunsford, the current BBC Food & Farming Awards producer of the year, told FFD the use of rare breeds was "a quality issue", and this was the message he preferred to push. "Rare breed animals taste better – that's a given – so in order to have the best products we have the best animals."

www.rbst.org.uk
www.slowfood.org.uk
www.buttlefarm.co.uk
www.charcutier.co.uk
www.clashesaddlebacks.co.uk

opinion

ROBERT BUTTLE, BUTTLE FARM, WILTS

THE GOLDEN RULE OF CHARCUTERIE is that the final product can only be as good as the carcass that you start with, and carcass quality is a factor of three things – breed, diet and age.

Rare breed pigs allowed to grow slowly in a free range environment with a high proportion of natural feed have the ability to produce the best quality carcass. Not only is the flavour of the meat superior to intensively farmed commercial pigs but also has a better structure to the muscle as a direct result of the slow growth, diet and exercise.

Fat quality is a core part of many types of charcuterie and rare breed fat is completely different to commercial fat, having a firm texture and a clean finish on the palate with a wonderful flavour.

Artisan charcuterie production is one of the best ways to showcase the superior quality of the great range of rare breed pigs that we have in the UK.

The artisan style of production uses a minimum of ingredients, preservatives and additives. In some cases there are only two ingredients, pork and salt – the addition of many, strong flavours in volume commercial production is often to compensate for blandness.

Artisan products are not 'rushed' but allowed to mature naturally, which involves more time and a



Nic Vickery

The British Saddleback is one of six rare or native pig breeds reared at Buttle Farm

greater loss of weight through drying out but it is this process that allows the magic of charcuterie to happen, intensifying and adding complexity to the flavour profile.

At Buttle Farm we only work with pigs produced on the farm so have complete control over the carcass quality. All our stock is pedigree rare breed, with six different breeds produced. There are some differences between the breeds but without exception they all make outstanding charcuterie.

• **Wiltshire pig farmer Robert Buttle** – a Slow Food and RBST supporter – has breeding herds of Tamworths, British Saddlebacks, Berkshires, Large Blacks, Oxford Sandy & Blacks and Mangalitzas, and produces his own Wiltshire-cure ham and other British charcuterie

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