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New Charcuterie

# *martinies*

## Old World Tradition with Texas

**BY LORRIE BAUMANN**

When Tim Harris heard that a group of Spanish businessmen were planning to export a herd of Spanish-bred pigs to the United States, his first reaction was a little outrage that the prized genetics of the swine whose meat goes into jamon Iberico were being allowed to leave Spain. Then, a few years later, when he got a call from Texas rancher Ashly

Martin, who said that the venture had gone bust, and he was looking for a buyer for those Spanish pigs, his first reaction was to be a little miffed that it had taken Martin so long to find his way to La Tienda, the online retailer through which Harris imports gourmet Spanish food products into the U.S. "If you Google 'Iberico,' I'm one of the first names that comes up," he said.

Martin's story was that he'd been a cattle rancher for the previous 14 years when he'd decided that he needed to find another line of work. "Cattle is a hard deal. I ran a lot on leased country. It's kind of hard to make money on it. I was getting out of livestock altogether," Martin had said.

He'd passed that word around to friends and neighbors while he was looking for an alternative way to feed his fam-

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ily, preferably something that would keep him a part of the agriculture industry, when a friend introduced him to a group of Spaniards who were looking for a partner for a plan involving Iberico pigs for which they were looking to find an American home. “I looked it up and started looking at the breed and what the hams bring,” he said. The plan sounded like it would allow him to stay in agriculture, and he’d be able to run them on his own land rather than trying to lease enough acreage to feed a herd big enough to benefit from the economies of scale necessary to making a profit on the operation. He decided to go into business with the Spaniards and they started flying pigs to him from Spain.

The swine settled in happily as American immigrants and started eating their way across Martin’s 1,500 acres in the Texas Hill Country. “Out here we have a lot of mesquite trees. There’s a lot of live oak, similar to the kind of acorns they have in Spain,” Martin said. “Pigs prefer the mesquite rather than the acorns. It’s like candy to them. They like to eat prickly pear – not just the fruit but also the thorny leaves. We’d burned off the pasture to rid it of the prickly pear thinking that I was doing the pigs a favor, but then it turned out that they like eating it.

“They clean up your pasture. That was a pleasant surprise. These pigs are cleaning up under the oaks. It’s hard, stony soil, so they don’t root much. They aerate the soil a little bit. It’s good for the pasture if you rotate them.”

Martin’s neighbors were snickering a little bit when they heard what Martin had going on, but he could live with that. Then the whole plan fell apart when the Spaniards backed out, leaving Martin with a 2,000 porker problem. “It turned from something exciting to something terrifying. We called everyone we knew to see what we could do with these pigs.”

It took him about 40 calls to find a phone number for La Tienda, and Tim Harris answered the call.

“Ashly reached out that they had the herd of Iberico pigs: ‘I was wondering if you wanted to work together?’ Harris picks up the story. “He had all these pigs running around, and his first plan with the Spaniards didn’t work out.

“I heard his story. He’s a former Marine. He’s been ranching cattle for 14 years and had been having a difficult time making ends meet with Angus,” Harris said. “His neighbors thought he was crazy. Pigs are just not central to Texas cuisine – it’s a beef state. The neighbors have to spend time keeping feral pigs off their property.”

At first, Harris struggled a bit with the idea that the pigs had been taken out of their native land, and he knew that some of his Spanish friends would disapprove. Then he started doing a little more research into the history of the Iberico breed, and he learned that Spaniards had been exporting pigs with those bloodlines out of their country and into the New World since the days of the Spanish Conquistadores, who’d boarded them onto ships as provisions for their voyages to the New World. The Spaniards had left breeding populations on the Canary Islands and on Bermuda and other uninhabited islands in the Caribbean,

so they’d be there to provision the ships on their next voyages.

One of those populations of pigs dropped off by the Spanish became the ancestors of the Ossabaw Island Hogs, a free-range breed found on Ossabaw Island, off the coast of Georgia. Now listed as critically endangered by The



Livestock Conservancy, these pigs have genes that suggest that they came from the Canary Islands, where the pigs probably interbred at some point with Asian pigs. According to The Livestock Conservancy, more research is needed to sort out exactly how the pigs on the Canary Islands and on Ossabaw Island are related to Spanish Iberian pigs. Since 1978, Ossabaw Island has been owned by the state of Georgia and managed as a preserve by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, which has recommended that the feral swine be eradicated to protect other species resident on the island. Georgia currently licenses quota hunts for the swine on the island.

The same sort of porcine migration may account for the presence of pork bones found at the bottom of a well in Jamestown, Virginia, just a short distance from where Harris set up shop as La Tienda 25 years ago. Merry A. Outlaw is the Senior Curator for the Jamestown Rediscovery Project, which is currently conducting archaeological excavations at Fort James, established in 1607 on Jamestown Island as the first permanent English settlement in the New World. These studies have revealed that pigs were the most commonly consumed domestic animal by those first settlers, she said. “These animals may have come from England or locations en route to Jamestown, such as the Canary Islands, the West Indies, or Bermuda, where the Sea Venture wrecked on its way to Virginia in 1609,” she said. “To determine the origin of the earliest pigs eaten and

discarded at Jamestown, Jamestown Rediscovery is currently steering DNA and isotopic research of pig bones.” Harris is so excited about this research that he’s helping support it.

This is a story that starts with the first settlers who arrived in Jamestown in 1607. Their route from England took them southwest off the Iberian coast, then along the African coast. The ships stopped in the Canary Islands before proceeding to the West Indies, where they stopped at a number of islands before eventually sailing up the American coastline to arrive at Jamestown Island. “The thought is that the pigs that came to Jamestown were picked up at one of these islands during the voyages,” Outlaw said. “But we don’t know.”

Those first colonists who arrived in Jamestown proved spectacularly inept at the skills required to establish a permanent colony. They realized almost from their arrival that the Virginia Company of London, which had recruited them to establish a colony intended to generate profits and return them to England, had exaggerated the ease of the endeavor. By October, half of those who’d arrived in April were dead, and few of those remaining survived the next winter. Resupply expeditions to the colony didn’t succeed in turning the situation around, since, inasmuch as they’d expected to find an uninhabited paradise with gold on the ground, the colonists didn’t come with much in the way of useful skills, and by the fall of 1608, it was obvious in London that the colony was failing. The company raised new capital and brought in a turnaround specialist in the person of Sir Thomas Gates, who recruited his own team of potential colonists with operational skills and in June 1609 set sail for the colony in a fleet of nine ships with the Sea Venture as the flagship for George Somers, named the admiral of the fleet, and carrying Gates, who was taking up his position as the colony’s governor.

The fleet followed the route taken by the earlier settlers until, within seven days of landfall, they ran into a hurricane off the coast of Bermuda. The Sea Venture was separated from the rest of the fleet and, badly damaged, limped to a landfall on the Bermuda island chain. Since the ship had been carrying some of Gates’ team of operations specialists who had actual skills and this was Bermuda rather than Gilligan’s Island, the Sea Venture’s passengers set to work building boats from the wreckage and trees they cut on the island, and within a year, they had two small ships, which they named the Patience and Deliverance, ready to sail up the coast to Jamestown. Meanwhile, the other hurricane-damaged ships in their fleet had arrived in Virginia in August 1609 after lightening their load by jettisoning most of the supplies they’d been bringing to resupply the colony. The arrival of more hungry mouths to feed rather than the supplies they were expecting was an unwelcome surprise to the colonists, who had just endured what’s still known among Virginia’s historians as the “Starving Time,” when most of them had died and the survivors had been reduced to eating the dead, which suggests that any pigs who’d come across on earlier voyages that had stopped in

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the Canary Islands were probably long gone.

The next spring, the castaways on Bermuda set sail for Virginia on *Patience* and *Deliverance*, possibly with a pen of captured pigs, and landed in Virginia in May 1610, where Gates took a look around at the colony and announced that their situation was untenable and the colonists should abandon their fort and sail up to Newfoundland, where they'd catch a ride from a fishing vessel headed back to England. The colonists boarded *Patience* and *Deliverance* and set sail up the James River, where, in a coincidence that wouldn't have passed muster with even the director of one of Steven Seagal's later films, but is nevertheless true, the flotilla met a new resupply fleet bearing another turnaround specialist recruited by the Virginia Company after they'd gotten the word in London that Gates and his team had been lost at sea.

This party was commanded by Sir Thomas West, Baron De La Warr, who'd been named the new governor of Jamestown. Since he had a year's worth of supplies with him, he was able to convince the colonists to turn around and sail back to Jamestown, where one of the first things he did was to take a look around and suggest, probably in an English aristocrat version of the tone that Jon Taffer uses when he walks into a bar that he's planning to rescue, that if the colonists were planning to survive in Jamestown, they might want to start by cleaning up the place.

That may have been, Outlaw said, when pig bones were unceremoniously dumped into an abandoned well and then sealed up until they were excavated by the Jamestown Rediscovery Project, which has noted that the earliest archaeological contexts of the pig bones also contain bones of the Bermuda petrel, a large sea bird known to inhabit only Bermuda. "We recovered several animal bones from Bermuda and shells from the West Indies and Bermuda from that well, and also from a second well that was filled with trash a year later," Outlaw said. "We hope to find that the pig bones from the first two wells were Bermudian pigs or Iberico pigs.... We don't know if they were coming from the West Indies, Bermuda, the Canaries, or the Azores. Or perhaps England. We just won't know until the completion of DNA and isotopic research."

"We know that hogs were in Jamestown in 1608 because John Smith documented them, noting that three pigs had

produced 60 pigs within a very short time. They were kept on a nearby island in the James River named Hog Island. It still is Hog Island.... During the 'Starving Time' winter of 1609 and 1610, the hogs of Hog Island were eaten by the Indians, who were also suffering from food shortages."

"An interesting fact about Jamestown is that it is where Pocahontas married John Rolfe, the colonist who first raised tobacco in Virginia, the crop that saved the colony. It was the number-one export from Virginia until the late 1990s or so," Outlaw added. "Tobacco grew here naturally, but it was Indian tobacco, about two or three times stronger than the South American tobacco. It's thought that John Rolfe, who was on the *Sea Venture*, got the tobacco seed from Bermuda, which was abundant in Bermuda, just like the hogs."

Within a month after their first phone conversation, Martin and Harris had put together a company. They offered fresh Texas-raised Iberico pork for sale, but they couldn't produce the pork fast enough to create a consistent supply of fresh meat, so Harris started shopping around for charcutiers who could cure the meat to make products that could even out supply with demand. He lives just down the road from Sam Edwards and Edwards Smokehouse, so he wandered over there to tell Sam about his Texas Iberico pork. "Our pigs will jump over an acorn to eat a mesquite bean. The climate in Texas is close to that in Spain, and our animals spend 100 percent of their lives outdoors. We're certified humane by A Greener World, with no antibiotics ever. We raise them humanely, so they're not confined. We don't use nose rings. We don't dock their tails. The mothers are never put in breeding crates. We think it's the right thing to do to treat these animals well," is part of how he pitches his pork. "Our animals are very calm. There's very little anxiety. Our productivity is as high or

higher than the Spanish herds. You can taste it in the product."

Edwards agreed to buy hams that he now brands as his Edwards Smokehouse Surryano hams. Broadbent's in Kuttawa, Kentucky, took some of the pork to make it into country hams and bacon. Loins went to Spotted Trotter in Atlanta, which produced the Sweet Prickly Pear Lomo that won a Good Food Award this year. "Kevin [Ouzts] makes all of our cured whole muscle products," Harris said. "We're not trying to copy Europe. This is a great breed that comes from Spain, but the product that we're making is American, and not only that, it's Texan."

"Our hams are funky and salty and smoky. They're nothing like you would produce in Spain – that was on purpose. We want to celebrate the amazing variety of American charcuterie," he added. "So far, we're succeeding, and that's great. Ashly still has his ranch." **GN**

