

Focus on Food: Top Quality Smithfield DURoC Pork

Chefs and restaurant owners today like to mention the efforts made to purvey the best ingredients for their kitchens. They want people to know they source the freshest and highest quality produce, meat, poultry, and seafood they can. Seeking out ingredients like heirloom grains, beans and legumes gives them an edge in creating the best flavors for their dishes. They like us to know that they're buying local and thinking sustainably. They're proud that they've built relationships with the farmers and distributors whom they work with.

Purveyors of top quality products in the food industry take the same deliberate approach. Competition is high, and it takes effort and investment to meet quality standards that set you above the pack. I recently attended an industry event hosted by Smithfield, makers of the Smithfield DURoC Pork Chef's Table line. The Portland event was attended mostly by chefs, restaurant owners and distributors of Smithfield products, so it was a great chance to learn more about high-end pork. I always enjoy learning about the food industry and where our food comes from.

This road show was one of many held in cities throughout the U.S.

Smithfield DURoC Pork

We often look to small, artisan companies and farms for top quality products, but Smithfield is not a small company. Large companies, including Smithfield, often produce several lines of products, each aimed at capturing a different slice of consumer and wholesale markets. And of course, each of these different companies and products has different price points for their products. (Just a few of the other companies under the Springfield umbrella are Eckrich, John Morrell, Armour, and Farmland.)

Are You "Label Conscious?"

Think about the things you notice when you go out for a really good (and yes, expensive) meal. You've heard the restaurant is good and decide to give it try. When you get there, you notice the décor and how good the staff is. And you certainly notice what's offered on the food and the bar menus and food that arrives at your table.

Next time you're out, notice too not only how the dishes are described on the menu, but also how they let you know where ingredients are sourced. You're there to enjoy a good meal, of course, so I'm not suggesting you get overly serious about this. But noticing some of the purveyors mentioned and where the food comes from can be part of the fun. And while over-the-top dish descriptions can be the stuff of comedy routines, the use of top quality ingredients truly should

translate to better tasting food.

The Story of Duroc, the Red Pig

“The Story of Duroc, the Red Pig.” Sounds like a great children’s story, doesn’t it? Actually, it is a family-friendly story and could be used to put those young-uns to bed—and instill a little American history while you’re at it. Christopher Columbus first brought Spanish or Portuguese red hogs to America. These pigs were known for their red coloring, great meat quality, and superior genetic lineage. They thrived and remained a prized source of food. Years later in 1823, Isaac Frink, a New York farmer, bought a red boar from another farmer, Harry Kelsey. While discussing the sale, Kelsey told Frink about his famous stallion, named “Duroc.” Frink named his new pig Duroc after this prized horse because he considered the pig to be superior stock too, and that’s what the breed came to be called.

By the time of the 1893 Chicago’s World Fair, the breed was very popular and it’s still considered to be one of the best breed of pigs out there. (You can think of Duroc pigs as the Black Angus of pork.)

So What Makes Smithfield DURoC Pork Better?



All pork cooks white, of course. (If you're old enough, you may remember the "Pork: The Other White Meat" campaign in the late 80's.) Many of us feel we have a handle on selecting good pieces of beef and fresh seafood. We may give less thought to pork. So what makes DURoC pork better?

There's a long list of live animal controls associated with animal handling. In the U.S., the standards are regulated by the USDA, of course. Smithfield goes above and beyond to ensure ethical treatment and safer food. All their pigs are born, raised and processed in the U.S., and can be traced to their farm of origin. All Smithfield DURoC Pork comes from the top 20% of all the pork the company produces. Smithfield's DURoC Hand-Selected Pork is less than 2% of their pork; truly the best of the best. They start with the best livestock.

Better flavored meat is partly the result of how well-marbled the meat is; the result of intramuscular fat levels. Tenderness comes from pork aging. The pH levels of meat affect the color and freshness of the meat. Smithfield's processing practices also segregates from the DURoC pork from their

other lines; ensuring the quality is maintained and resulting in an especially fresh product.

(Unfortunately,) Higher Quality Does Mean Higher Prices

Can you get DURoC pork at home? Well, not really. The brand really is targeted toward those higher end restaurants willing to source superior meat. There are a handful of retail specialty butchers who carry it. (One is Tony's Markets in the Denver area, according to Smithfield's Edward Wayda.) So at this time, we go back to reading our menu and taking note of restaurants that carry it. And yes, it's fair to say that a restaurant that uses better quality products justifies the higher prices they pass down to us.

The proof, of course, is in the taste. Smithfield chose well in selecting LeChon to host the Portland event. We were treated to a myriad of dishes using DURoC pork. Can a bad cook ruin a wonderful cut of meat? Of course. But that didn't happen under the skilled care of LeChon's Executive Chef Jaco Smith and his staff.

Portland's LeChon Restaurant

LeChon is a South American-inspired restaurant, just across the street from Portland's downtown Tom McCall Waterfront Park. Their wood-fired oven does more than make good pizza or flatbread. (That's something I can't help but notice—wood-fired cooking does so many wonderful things to—well, anything. It seems a waste when it's used just used for bread.) Chef Jaco Smith uses the oven to create many of his dishes from Argentina, Chile and Patagonia, including meats, seafood and vegetables. Raised in a family of cattle, sheep and grain farmers, each of the dishes I sampled show that he starts with great ingredients—and also knows technique and presentation.

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LeChon is housed at the garden level of an historic building that lends all the cavernous charm and exposed brick walls that go along with them. There are private booth-nooks with low-lighting and a great bar space with two “big-deal” saltwater fish tanks, including a 1,000-gallon reef tank and a second 300-gallon tank with hypnotic jelly fish. The restaurant is open for lunch and dinner and regularly hosts special-event chef suppers. I definitely recommend a visit.



Expertly Showing Off DURoC Pork

When you're handed a cocktail with a bacon garnish, you say, "Thank you." Here's to bacon-infused cachaça, a Brazilian spirit of fermented sugarcane juice.



Ending on a sweet note, slices of Argentinian chocolate torta were passed around. The cake was sprinkled with candied log-smoked bacon.

Eating well means paying attention to the quality of our ingredients. At home, there are ways to cut corners and ways where spending a bit more pays off. Apparently, this applies to restaurants too.

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For More:

- Smithfield DURoC, <http://smithfieldfarmlandfoodservice.com>
- LeChon, Portland, <http://lechonpdx.com/>

-All photos by Nancy Zaffaro.