



Hamming it up in Flatonía

Spanish ibérico pork finds footing in Texas

story by **Clayton Maxwell**

TEXAS AND SPAIN HAVE JOINED FORCES IN an unexpected, four-legged way. For the first time since explorer Hernando de Soto did so back in 1539, the finest of Spanish ham, *jamón ibérico de bellota*, has been imported to the United States in its original form—as a pig. One hundred and fifty purebred Iberian pigs, to be exact, which boarded a KLM flight in Spain for their new homes in Flatonía in 2013. Manuel Murga and Sergio Marsal, the Spanish porcine visionaries who founded

Murga shows me a map of live oaks across the state. “This is why we came to Texas,” he says.

Acornseekers brand pork, hatched this bold plan; they knew there was a better way for Americans to enjoy Spain’s most revered cured ham than smuggling it in their suitcases.

Once flown over the Atlantic, there were no guarantees that the pigs would pass quarantine, but their knuckle-biting venture has paid off. Turns out, Iberian pigs love Texas. The original 150 pigs of the Acornseekers brand, which Murga and Marsal call “the pioneers,” have multiplied to a herd of 2,000. These American-born pigs are now entitled to their green cards, Murga jokes.

And Texas loves those pigs right back. Their meat is in such demand that, in a trial sale at a Houston H-E-B last summer, the pork sold out within a week. Good things unfold, apparently, when pigs fly.

I visit Murga at the Acornseekers office, a trailer plopped down on an oak-dotted farm off a back road between Smithville and Flatonía. Marsal, the marketing and business half of the Acornseekers partnership, is not in town. While Murga makes espresso, I gush to him about my love of cured Spanish ham. I tell him how, when I lived in Madrid, I regularly asked for samples of the high-end *jamón de bellota* (literally, ham of acorns) at the *Museo de Jamón* (the Ham Museum, which is actually a shop) just to watch the bare-armed butcher shave the cured crimson slivers from the violin-shaped hind leg. He’d then hand them to me over the counter on a thin sheet of white paper, like a sacred offering, and I’d let the smoky goodness melt on my tongue. Spanish nirvana.

This is nothing new to Murga. He’s heard these tales countless times from Americans who’ve traveled to Spain. Then he hears the inevitable question that follows: “Why is it so hard to find in the United States?”

Manuel Murga brought Spanish pork to Texas.



More than 100 Spanish pigs formed the beginning of Texas' first Iberian herd. These pigs eat mostly acorns, and their meat tastes delicious.

“That’s the first reason I did this,” explains Murga, who says vagaries of the inspection process complicate importing the meat. “Imagine you are a dealer here and you are expecting 1,000 pounds and in the end you only get 200. Your clients are waiting, and it’s a real problem. So I said this should be done in a different way.”

Murga slaps a special map of Texas down on the table in front of me. “This is why we came to Texas,” he says, pointing. “The area in green shows the live oaks.” The map is almost entirely green. Except for a few patches out west, Texas is blanketed in live oaks, all working night and day to do what live oaks do best:

make acorns. To an Iberian pig, acorns are heaven. During the essential fattening-up season, called the *montanera* (when pigs go to the *montañas*, or mountains, for grazing) Iberian pigs eat only acorns, 10 to 15 pounds a day. Over the species’ 2,000 years of acorn eating, these clever pigs have developed a talent for unshelling the acorns in their jaws and spitting the unwanted caps out, a skill unique to this particular pig.

Murga, an agricultural engineer, grew up with pigs. His family owns two ranches about 40 miles outside of his hometown of Seville, where his grandfather, father, and brother

currently raise Iberian pigs. “I’ve long been deeply involved in this business,” Murga says, evident passion in his voice. “I love it because I love the animal, and not only the animal, but I love the environment as well. You can feed the Iberian pig anywhere in the world, but without the right environment, you are not going to get this quality.”

And, lucky for us, Murga and Marsal found “the right environment” deep in the heart of Texas. Murga, who had noted the prevalence of live oaks in movies about Texas, visited the state nine years ago and collected samples of acorns from various ranches. He took the nuts back to Spain for analysis and found they have the same composition

as the acorns on his family ranch. “So then I realized that the only thing missing here in Texas were the pigs,” Murga says. “You have the live oaks, you have the clients—maybe the best market in the world right now—but no pigs. I prayed hard to bring the pigs, and we did it,” he says, laughing.

A respect for the comfort and intelligence of the Iberian pigs is another key component in Acornseekers’ definition of “the right environment.” The pigs roam over the Flatonía ranch, sleeping, swimming, and eating freely, like their Spanish cousins that ramble the Andalusian countryside. When Murga takes me out to walk among them, they barely notice me as they root in the dirt and lounge in a happy pig pile. They are the Labrador retrievers of pigs.

Acornseekers’ compassionate treatment of the animals extends to their final hour. “In Spanish, we don’t say

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‘slaughter’, we say ‘sacrifice,’” Murga explains. Acornseekers brings in professionals from Spain to help in the “sacrifice,” done in a very particular way. “It’s very important to avoid any suffering of the pig.” So even as they are raising Old World pigs in New World digs, Acornseekers isn’t changing anything up. Just like in Spain, nothing is rushed—the pig breeding, the slaughter, the curing. “I’m not trying to do anything here that is new,” Murga says, “because this process has been done in Spain for more than 2,000 years and it works, so we only need to replicate it here.”

Murga says his favorite part of the

whole process is watching the faces of people as they eat the finished product. While the most sought-after meat, the cured ham, will not be ready until spring 2019, Acornseekers’ fresh pork is now available to buy online and in restaurants throughout the United States. And because of its singular nutty flavor, the demand is exceeding their supply.

If you want to actually meet some of these acorn-scarfing black pigs, you can hoof it to the shop and restaurant in Columbus that Murga and Marsal plan to open in early 2019.

Judge for yourself what happens when pigs fly. 🐷



ACORNSEEKERS PORK

is available for purchase online and at restaurants, including Eberly in Austin, Fearings in Dallas, and Bliss in San Antonio. acornseekers.com.

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