Melanie Grayce Acostavalle

Dinner with a Pedigree

The return of heritage livestock to the American plate

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The sun is fading into the snowy hills that rim Manx Station Farm and out by the barn the animals stir, getting ready for their dinner. The 192-acre farm, located in Greenwich, New York, a rural farming community about an hour north of Albany, is the bucolic home of Glenwood Rowse, a 57-year-old, soft-spoken, gentle fellow. Mr. Rowse, born in Colorado and raised in “the beef state” of Nebraska, has a Ph.D. in Educational Psychology and works in Albany for the State Education Department. Mr. Rowse’s true passion, however, is the countryside and his farm filled with goats, chickens, horses and cows. He is a farmer at heart.

The sight of him walking down the path with his dog, Alf, is enough to turn the heads of his “girls.” Mr. Rowse greets his herd in a gentlemanly manner and then quickly gets down to the evening business of feeding the heifers. As he plops hay into the feeding area, the heifers saunter over, stake out a bale and then thrust their heads into the hay. They pop their heads back up, look at him and begin to chew, their purple tongues working the hay back into their mouths. During the spring and summer months, these cows wander the hills snacking on grass, alfalfa, vines, apples and other grazing goodies.

Called Belted Galloways, these cows are special and have a distinctive look. They are smallish with short little legs. Mr. Rowse’s average heifer only weighs 1,000 pounds and his bulls weigh about 1,200 pounds. They are dwarfed in size by another cow on the farm, a 1,600-pound Brahma and Angus crossbreed that Mr. Rowse is boarding for the winter.

Their ears are fuzzy, little mounds, more teddy bear than cow. Many of the heifers have a yellow numbered tag hanging from an ear, denoting their registration with the Belted Galloway Society of the United States, an organization that works to promote and track the approximately 2,500 Belted Galloways in America.

The double-coated cows have small dense fur close to their skin and a long, curly black or reddish-brown hair coat on top. The coat tousles in the wind, a bovine “Breck Girl” it seems, but in actuality, that coat is ultra-protective against the harsh winter snow. “They tend to sleep out here in the snowstorm,” said Rowse pointing to his open hills, “and they will get up and they are just totally covered in snow.” These cows go without a barn.

The distinctive visual feature of these animals is a wide, white “belt” that stretches from shoulder to lower belly. Like a giant white bandage wrapped around the center of the cow, that hide marking is the genetic trait that explains the breed nickname, “Belties.” The petite size, the little ears, the furry coat and the wide belt, visually add up to make for a very cute cow.

But these are not beauties, cuddly pets or novelties. They are the desire of many a gourmet. The meat of a Belted Galloway is lean, low in cholesterol and very juicy, according to Mr. Rowse. That double-layer coat replaces a layer of back fat that most cows have, making Beltie beef much leaner. The bantam size is ideal for grass grazing on small-acreage farms, and that grass-fed diet gives the meat a clean taste, with the steaks a nearly crimson-violet color. Manhattan food lover restaurants like Savoy, in SoHo, and Rose Water, in Brooklyn’s Park Slope, compete for Mr. Rowse’s choice cuts. The Cleaver Co., a Manhattan caterer, uses Mr. Rowse’s beef at high-society benefits and parties.

Mr. Rowse's cows represent a small but growing population of rare breed livestock in the United States. Commonly called "heritage breeds," these Belted Galloways are an example of the kind of animal that was common to small and medium-sized American farms before World War II. Now, the animals are making a comeback, and the growing population is good news for farmers, scientists and chefs. Farmers say that the consumer market for heritage breeds is helping them get a fair price for high-quality meat. Scientists believe that these animals are crucial to maintaining a genetic diversity to the livestock in America. And Chefs say that the meat tastes better and diners will pay a premium for the finer cuts.

Although the market for these animals and their meat is just beginning, gourmets are already starting a craze. In food circles, this meat is talked about in the same way that gardeners and chefs used to chatter about heirloom tomatoes. Ten years ago, those tomatoes were only available to the select few, in select places, at premium prices—not so now. If the comparison between tomatoes and heritage meat is accurate, we may soon see this type of meat on more plates and in select grocery stores. The buzz for heritage animal meat is growing, and it could be that this meat is the next new food trend in America.

The post-World War II industrialized farming model is to quickly raise as many animals as possible, on as few acres as necessary, with as little cost as needed. Generally, an industrialized operation means that animals are kept in small indoor lots with little opportunity to exercise, and they are fed grain or another inexpensive food source. In order to accommodate the tight conditions and limited diets, animals are generally given antibiotics to prevent disease and growth hormones to increase carcass size. These animals also tend to be processed, slaughtered and packaged as young as possible so that more animals can enter the system quickly. Further, animals in the industrialized sector are bred to be meatier and bigger. Veterinarians have long used selective breeding practices to develop animals that can survive in industrial settings. The farming process is mechanized for maximum productivity and profit margin. That is the very essence of any industrialized process, be it car manufacturing or a television assembly line.

Heritage animals are scarce in this country because they were bred out of the industrialized sector. Prior to World War II, these breeds served multiple purposes on a small farm. A cow would have been used for milk and meat, used as an ox on the farm, and would have been on the pasture to control grass and weeds. Rare breed enthusiasts talk about the "hardy" characteristics of the animal. Hardy is characterized by an ability to live outdoors, a higher level of fertility and better maternal instincts, a longer life, a better ability to forage, disease resistance, and no requirement of vitamins or processed feed. These hardy traits that were perfect on the small farm, were lousy in the industrialized setting. "They did not meet the needs for industrialized production," said Donald Bixby. "They were developed in an era when animals were expected to be more sustainable."

Bixby has worked with heritage breed animals for more than 20 years and is currently the Technical Director of the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy, an organization developed to promote and protect endangered breeds of livestock. Bixby, a 60-year-old veterinarian by trade has had a hand in practically every matter relating to these animals since 1983. He is part of a group of scientists who work to collect and store the DNA from these rare breeds, he visits heritage breed farmers out in the field and

collects data on breed populations, and in 2000, he was even honored by Slow Food International for his preservation work.

Bixby organized the first American rare breed livestock show in 1986, but breed conservation in this country really began in 1975 when historians working at farm museums, like Old Sturbridge Village in Sturbridge, Mass., began planning celebrations for the nation's bicentennial. Using farm archive materials, the historians went to the countryside to find rare breeds to include in their celebrations. They found that these breeds were very rare and tended to be cared for by very old farmers. Recognizing a need to save the breeds, these historian started bringing the animals to farm museums.

According to Bixby, the effort to save rare breeds in Britain began a few years earlier and in much more dramatic fashion. In the early 1970s, the Regents Park Zoo in London decided to get rid of its collection of rare breed livestock in favor of a new exhibit for large cats. Hearing that the zoo had begun sending its rare livestock to slaughter, a group of farmers in The Cotswolds stepped in to save the animals. Years later, the work done to save those rare breeds has evolved into the Cotswold Farm Park, a recreational and educational farm about rare breeds.

In 1977, American scientists, historians and breeders founded an organization in Vermont called The Minor Breeds Conservancy. That organization has morphed into several breed and region specific organizations, including Bixby's American Livestock Breeds Conservancy. The general purpose of these organizations is to promote the breeds, conserve the animals and work with veterinarians to collect genetic materials from the animals.

For the past 15 years, and particularly in the last five years, veterinarians across the country have harvested germplasm, or hereditary DNA, from rare breeds of livestock to help preserve diversity in the species of animal. For example, if there was a severe disease in the cattle industry affecting one breed of cow, agriculturists would want to access old lines of livestock as a way to breed out that disease. Or, if cattle ranchers needed to develop a new crossbreed of cow, they might want to access old breed traits to select for certain qualities. The purpose of preserving this germplasm transcends just building a DNA library. It is the safety precaution necessary for protecting and evolving a species.

Currently, there are three major sites for the storage of animal germplasm: The American Livestock Breeds Conservancy in North Carolina, the United States Department of Agriculture bank in Colorado, and the privately operated Swiss Village Foundation in Rhode Island. The three organizations work together to visit farms, collect germplasm and store the animal material.

Dr. George Saperstein is the Chair of Environmental and Population Health at Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine in Massachusetts. He works with the Swiss Village Foundation to catalog the DNA of rare breeds on the East coast. According to Saperstein, the concept for a national seed bank of heritage animal DNA developed in 1990 when Congress passed a bill calling for a national animal germplasm bank. Bureaucracy and budget problems stalled the development of the national program, and it wasn't until 1999 that the national lab began to harvest genetic material. Saperstein began working with the Swiss Village Foundation in 2001, and he directs a team of Tufts University veterinarians who collect germplasm from the most "out of favor breeds."

The work of cataloging the semen and embryos of rare breeds is complex. Scientists must catalog color combinations, breed variations and other traits, and they have to travel all over the country to complete the work. The Swiss Village Foundation aims to have 200 embryos from various females and semen from eight to ten males for each breed. They have to plan ovulations and often have to give injections to speed the process—work not unlike assisted reproduction in people. "We don't want them to become extinct," said Saperstein of the animals.

There is an inherent paradox in saving the genetic material of an animal destined for the dinner table. In order to save the animals, people have to eat them. In other words, the work of these organizations is to promote certain breeds so that farmers will raise the animals and then sell them as high-quality, gourmet meat.

And there is a market. The gossip among chefs and foodies is that this choice meat is like a fine, rare wine. Like the birth of the heirloom tomato market a decade ago, this food trend is in its "adolescence" according to Bixby, but he cautions against the pitfalls of grouping livestock together under an umbrella term like "heritage." His vision of the market is for meat to be breed specific, like it is in Great Britain. There, consumers have a closer association to agriculture, and choose their meat according to breed—a Belted Galloway steak or a Devon roast. That future market could also be modeled after the wine market. Different varietals of grapes for a wine and different breeds of cow for a steak.

Others, like William Rubel, draw a comparison between heritage animals and the birth of the organic food movement in the late 1960s. Rubel, a California food writer and the author of the traditional hearth cookbook, *The Magic of Fire*, believes that consumers go through an adapting process when presented with new food choices. First, they become educated about a product. Then, they develop a taste for the new flavor. "It has been so long since there was a choice of pigs you could buy in the market," said Rubel. "Once people become aware that there are different pigs and they are going to taste different, then it will be the same thing that happened with vegetables."

The parallel to the organic vegetable movement is also important because it alludes to an emotion about getting back to nature and being closer to the farm. Words like organic, grass-fed and free-range, although unregulated terms, mean something to consumers. It's food with ethics and that is a fashionable "cause" popular with gourmands.

"The top end of the market is always going to pay for what is considered fashionable," said Rubel. "Right now there is a resurgent interest in what we can call traditional food—old fashioned food and traditional food ways." To Rubel, organic produce is "the idea of the small farm and olden varieties, but also the idea of fashion."

If heritage animals are food fashion, then Patrick Martins and Todd Wickstrom design the haute cuisine. They founded Heritage Foods USA, a four-year old organization that promotes and sells foods derived from rare breeds of American livestock and crops. Martins started the first American chapter of Slow Food International in 2000. His work while Executive Director of Slow Food USA included starting a program to recruit farmers to raise "indigenous" turkeys for a gourmet market. That work at Slow Food USA evolved into Heritage Foods USA, a brand new organization and business.

Heritage Foods USA is widely acknowledged as setting the market price for heritage meat, and Martins is credited with organizing a loose collective of farmers into a profitable business. “Like the organic movement in 1970 you have a core group of people who are starting to believe in something,” said Martins of the 50 farmers who supply his business with product. The company sells turkey, chicken, pork, lamb, bison, wild salmon, oysters and some beef through a mail-order catalog and Web site. The meat is shipped overnight, frozen or fresh.

Although Heritage Foods USA ships throughout the calendar year, the busy season is Thanksgiving, and the high-demand item is turkeys. Five years ago the market for heritage turkeys didn’t really exist. Wickstrom attributes newspaper articles and word of mouth from epicureans as the main reason that the market for heritage turkey meat has increased. Wickstrom said that they sold out of turkeys in 2004. Buyers last year even logged on to a “turkey-cam” Web site so that they could see exactly where their bird was raised. “It resonates with people more than any other holiday,” said Wickstrom of the Thanksgiving market. “If we had started with lamb we would not have been as successful.”

Success in less than three years is possible because buyers want a “traditional” turkey and they are willing to pay a lot for it. This year, Heritage Foods USA is selling two types of rare breed turkeys. An eight to ten pound American Bronze or Bourbon Red turkey will cost $99 frozen, and $109 fresh. A fresh 19-pound turkey, of either breed, will cost $199.

Other farmers also recognize the demand for an authentic bird. “There are a lot of people in the city who think that it is a treat,” said Jill Gies of The Pasture Farm in Fort Plain, New York. In 2003, Slow Food USA contacted Gies and encouraged her to start raising heritage turkeys. They continue to list her on their Web site of regional producers. Gies does not sell her birds through Heritage Foods USA, but instead, customers come to her farm to pick up the turkey or she makes a delivery. Gies raised 70 Bourbon Red turkeys in 2004, and 50 in 2003, with most of her sales to customers in Manhattan. The Bourbon Red was a good choice for Gies because they “appeal to the people who are used to getting something meaty.” The common, commercial frozen turkey that most consumers eat is a Broad-breasted White turkey, a bird genetically bred to have a very large, very meaty breast. Bourbon Reds tend to be quite different with a smaller body and more dark meat.

Customers tell Gies that the turkey meat tastes “clean” and “fresh.” Gies does not use any growth hormones on her birds but allows them to run free and feast on whatever they find. She also supplements their diet with an expensive organic grain. The cost of the organic grain, though, limits her profit margin and so this season she plans to sell the birds for more. In 2004, she only charged $3.50 a pound; this year, she will charge $5. “I had one gal who said I needed to charge more,” she said. “People don’t mind.”

The profit margin on a $5 a pound heritage turkey, opposed to a supermarket bird that can go as low as $.89 cents a pound, is enjoyed by people who, literally, have a garden operation. Turkeys are great exterminators and regularly used by farmers to eliminate mites and garden bugs. This symbiotic relationship is perfect for farmer and bird—farmers have an animal that requires very little overhead, will only stay on the farm for a short season and will work on the fields for its duration. The birds get to be free on the range, happily wandering and devouring bugs until Thanksgiving.

While exact statistics for the number of farmers raising heritage breeds do not exist, there is agreement in the farming and breed conservation community that more people are doing it. "These heritage animals currently seem to be what people are looking to," said Lisa Sauer from the New England Heritage Breeds Conservancy, a regional organization devoted to the preservation of rare breed animals in the Northeast. Sauer receives many phone calls from people who have recently purchased a farm and are looking for easy breeds, or from farmers who are looking to pay for their property and feed themselves. "Our organization is focusing on raising heritage livestock for a niche market," said Sauer. "Right now it is very small."

To expand on the demand to raise heritage breeds, Sauer works on cattle production statistics so that farmers can educate themselves on breed growth and expected yields. Sauer said that it generally costs less to raise one of these animals to market and farmers raising heritage breeds on pasture have found that the animals finish quicker and healthier than the more commercial breeds.

Her organization is also working to develop a regional market for heritage beef. Currently, the organization sells grass-fed beef as a collective, to universities and restaurants in the Northeast. They want to develop a new market exclusively for heritage beef, and that market, in turn, would get the farmer a better price for his beef. "You can't compete with agribusinesses who are raising hundreds of thousands of animals," said Sauer of the beef markets in the Midwest, "but for the farmer with ten acres he can at least get some return on his investment."

Return on investment is imperative for all farmers, including gentleman farmers like Mr. Rowse. More than a year ago, the New England Heritage Breeds Conservancy visited Manx Station to see if his cows would qualify for inclusion into their future niche market for heritage beef—they did. But until that gets started, Mr. Rowse has two options for selling his meat. He can market it himself and sell it out of his deep freeze. Or, he can try to find a local group that works together to market, distribute and sell meat collectively. Last year, he found such a group, called Farm to Chef Express, and now they market and distribute his meat in Manhattan.

Farm to Chef Express has operated since last summer, and the organization has concentrated on selling a mix of conventional and heritage beef, pork, turkey and lamb. In the future they plan to expand to high-end vegetables and fruits. Farm to Chef Express fills a niche in the New York City market, as there are no other mechanisms to get local heritage animal meat into the city. This small organization, though, just might be the key to helping local New York producers reach the right market.

Peter Hoffman, the chef at the gourmet downtown Manhattan restaurant Savoy, is a big supporter of Farm to Chef Express. Hoffman serves as an Advisory Board member of Farm to Chef Express, and he uses various products in his restaurant, including Manx Station beef. He insists upon buying from farmers with high farming and production standards. He wants his meat local, grass-fed, and hormone-free, and he wants to know the farmer who raised the animal. But those ideals are not easily translated on a menu, and Hoffman struggles with ways to educate his diners on the benefits of how their meat entrée was raised and produced. "Our job, if we are going to educate people on the topic," said Hoffman, "is that it isn't just about monikers, it's about how the animal was raised."

Galen Zamarra, chef at Mas in Manhattan's West Village, also struggles with ways to describe this special product on his menu. Zamarra purchases most of his pork through Farm to Chef Express from Flying Pigs Farm. Flying Pigs Farm, one of Mr. Rowse's neighbors, produces three kinds of heritage pork. Zamarra lists the name of the farm on his menu because he believes his diners associate that farm with quality. "I think people 'ooh and ah' about a farm name a bit more," said Zamarra. "Certainly Flying Pigs has a name around the city. They are at the Greenmarket and they are popular, and I think that starts to set a standard for quality."

While the name of a farm may mean something to diners at Mas, Zamarra feels that other terms like "heritage" and "grass-fed" confuse the customer. In fact, he has had diners ask him about the term grass-fed, and he has explained to them that not all cows eat grass. "I honestly think that most people have no clue what cows really eat," said Zamarra. "We have to teach the consumer."

Terminology and teaching aside, the diner ultimately cares most about the quality and the taste of the meat. So is Manx Station Farm heritage animal beef really better than conventional quality beef? At Rose Water, a restaurant in Park Slope, Brooklyn, chef Ethan Kostbar serves Manx Station Farm short ribs. The meat is toothsome, succulent and deliciously juicy and it falls off the bone in chunks. Kostbar slow cooks his short ribs so that the fat marbling in the beef melts and flows into the muscle.

At home, a $3.85 a pound chuck roast from Manx Station, cooks into a perfect beef delight. While typically an unpopular cut among chefs, this is Mr. Rowse's favorite cut of meat and he says it is "one of the best tasting." After five hours of slow roasting, the meat, weighed down by its own juices, falls from the bone. The meat is rich, but not fatty, and tastes beefy almost gamey. In some places, the meat is almost crimson in color, a product of the grass-fed diet, according to Mr. Rowse. His roast is without question, the perfect comfort food.

Mr. Rowse has a lot of pride in his Belted Galloway beef and knows that it tastes better than conventional beef. Still, he likes to hear it from customers. "It is very satisfying to provide a good product that people appreciate," said Mr. Rowse.

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