Getting Pork on the Consumer’s Plate

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Introduction

I am Brad Smoliak, a chef born and raised Alberta. I have been a chef for the past twenty years in Edmonton where I have worked in restaurants, hotels, private clubs, and was co-founder of the internationally recognized Hardware Grill. Most recently, I was the executive chef for the Alberta government at the Alberta House and consulting chef for the 2010 Winter Olympics Alberta train. I do in home catering as well as teaching cooking classes in and around central Alberta. I am a research and product development chef specializing in developing formulations and recipes for the food manufacturing sector for both retail and foodservice, and have just recently finished studies at the University of Guelph to become a certified research chef (CRC)

My history and experience is wide and varied, and although I don’t consider myself as an “expert” I do know and love people and food, and love cooking.

Taste and Value

People are constantly searching out great tasting food, for themselves and their families, and as a chef I want to help them, and with great tasting Alberta pork, that helps to make my job easier.

The most talked about dish and the dish that got the most surprising reviews at the Olympics was the:

Beer brined (Big Rock Traditional Ale™) double pork chop with butter cabbage, chive mashed potatoes, and natural reduction.

Pure comfort food!
Pork has become the new fish - it’s the food they like other people to cook for them, and they are intimidated by which cuts to use, how long to cook it for, and to what doneness.

Chefs cook pork to medium and above. Consumers tend to over-cook pork and dry it out. Only certain pork cuts are widely used - loin, tenderloin and chops. We have to change that.

What about the shoulder, butt, and legs and hocks? When you travel to the United States, check out the flyers from some of their more famous grocery chains. They advertise the cheaper cuts because there is a demand! European cultures use a wider variety of cuts and celebrate the pig like no other animal, why can’t we do that here?

In June I went to my new favorite restaurant of the year, they served - braised pig’s tails, pork hocks, pork blade steaks, and pork riblettes and pigs ears. The restaurant was packed, including: the lady shoppers who had just come off Michigan Avenue, oncologists, attending their international conference, and business guys grabbing a bite before the hockey game.

Chicago is the undisputed pork capital of the USA. This is a bold statement, for a steak town. Edmonton - could we do the same?

Smithfield hams out of Virginia, has a fantastic billion dollar plus industry all focused on the pig, and yet in Canada and Alberta our hog industry is dying. I had a recent conversation with a respected meat broker who just signed a contract to bring in bacon, from the USA, to be sold at $7.99/kg, at the retail level.

Why is this happening? Why don’t we have a competitive bacon industry here in Alberta? We have the product. Let’s start small. Let’s start working on a bacon industry.

**Focus on the Customer**

Getting them to enjoy and use pork is the secret. We could focus on specialized pork breeds as opposed to commodity pork. Specialized breeds, like Berkshire, in Japanese korbuta, are increasing in popularity, and consumers are demanding these specialized products.

Compare the pork counter to the vegetable market. I recently attended a produce marketing show, showcasing the many different specialized vegetables that are available. Mini carrots are no longer considered a
specialized vegetable. People are demanding more and more specialized items, not just vegetables, but in their meat products.

When I was a kid growing up beef was beef, but now, there is certified Angus, Kobe, grass fed, prime, and organic, and hormone free, antibiotic free. The choices are not necessarily endless, but there are choices.

Pork has to do the same. We need to give the pig some cachet!

Labeling pork as Canadian pork, or Alberta is not enough. We have to get our heads out of the sand. We have to stop hiding beyond our past successes with product and get with the new millennium before it is too late. On a recent trip to Italy with some other chefs, and foodies, we became inspired with how the Italians celebrate their food. And although pork was not necessarily served as an entrée it was used in salami, salumi, prosciutto, caracole, pasta, sandwiches, it was used everywhere, and for everything.

But the real question is how do we get people to eat more pork? Some suggestions:

**Make it Easier for the Consumer to Cook Pork:**

Better packaging and labeling, with cooking methods on the package.

Longos grocery chain in Ontario does a great job of telling consumers the cuts and what they should be using them for:

- Grilling
- Braising
- Roasting

Develop more ready to cook or ready to eat meals featuring pork.

And if consumers want their pork well done, develop flavorful recipes that allow them to do that. Make the recipes with easy few steps, and simple ingredients. Ethnic recipes lead the pack with flavor profiles, but without using tons of ingredients.

**Exploit Specific Products**

Pork belly is a cut where there has been an explosion over the last couple of years. Pulled pork is another ‘trendy’ dish that is now seen everywhere.

Pork burgers - why not? A restaurant in the Crowsnest Pass featured it on their menu and sold out.
Sell the Secondary Cuts

In the USA a lot of the grocery store flyers promote the secondary cuts. Give in grocery store demonstrations on how to use the secondary cuts. “Story telling” is one of the easiest forms of communication. Look at the success of Loblaws, with Galen Weston making TV commercials.

Celebrate the Pig

Organize Special Events.

For example there was a BBQ in the Big Apple

- 100,000 people
- 11 tons of pork
- tons of spare ribs
- tons of back ribs

Promote pork at special events, Capital Ex, Folk Fest, Canmore Folk Fest etc. Pulled pork sandwich at Oiler and Flames games are popular. Promote the use of pork at tailgate parties.

There is a real opportunity to participate in events that reach the general public. The recent Grey Cup festivities in Edmonton, where for basically 4 days over 100,000 people were in the downtown area daily. I did cooking demos in the “Alberta House” and the feedback was great.

That is on the smaller scale, but on large scale, promoting pork, by offering samples, i.e. Cuban pork sandwiches, pulled pork, at these large festive events are just examples of how the drive for pork could be achieved.

The World Junior Hockey tournament is happening next year in Calgary and Edmonton lets figure out how to get involved.

The Upcoming Indy Race!! How do we get pork involved?

Last year Capital Ex had a monster burger featuring local hormone free beef, they expected to sell about 100 of these 1kg burgers, and they sold over 400!

Develop Value Chains

At the University of Kentucky Bob Perry is promoting sustainable food development. Bob has developed a program for purchasing product from local farmers to supply his 17 resort park restaurants, in addition to outlets at the University of Kentucky. He worked in conjunction with the famers so that they were part of the process.
Could we start that here? Could we work with the University of Alberta, to use more pork in their offerings at the outlets?

I think we don’t necessarily have to think “outside the box”, because that can scare people, we need to think on the “perimeter of the box”.

Transparency - By transparency people must be honest as to how much they need to make, how much it cost to produce, deliver and process. Everything must be included.

Take the retail cuts and build a hog on a spread sheet to see how much it cost. That way we can see the whole picture of the hog.

- All links of the chain, MUST BE EQUAL
- All parties involved MUST MAKE MONEY
- All parties MUST STAY COMMITTED- 5 YEARS

**Conclusion**

It is a process and it is not going to happen over night. Many years ago I worked for a restaurant chain that did something unheard of at the time. They opened their books to their suppliers, and worked together so that they both could be profitable, because we are all in the business of making money. The restaurant chain and the supplier still do business to this day and are a model which a lot of companies have followed. People really have to work together and stay committed to the process.

Focus on the customer and what they want. Look what happened recently to the car industry. They were not giving people what they wanted. If we don’t know, let’s find out instead of just offering what we want.

Stop treating pork as a commodity and start treating and celebrating it as food!!

A demand for pork has to be created by us!