

The last of their kind

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Extinct in its home country, the Wessex saddleback pig thrives in small pockets here.



THE fat black pigs with the broad white stripe running down their bellies in Kenneth Neff's front paddock might not know it but they have been put on a global Slow Food list recognising them as the last of their kind.

Wessex saddlebacks, a breed originating in the New Forest of Hampshire in England, are natural outdoor foragers. With the rise of industrial factory piggeries the breed was neglected and became extinct in England last century.

By chance, in 1931, before the demise of the breed, a man called Mr R. Turpin imported a small breeding herd to his farm in Queensland. That herd became the nucleus of what was to be one of the last bastions of Wessex saddlebacks on the planet

- just 150 registered breeding sows spread across a few score of properties in Australia.

Neff's charcuterie. Photo: Richard Cornish

Their listing on the international Slow Food Ark of Taste is the work of years of lobbying by local breeders and food activists. "It's wonderful that Slow Food Italy has included the Australian Wessex saddleback herd on the Ark of Taste," says Neff, as he leads us to his outdoor charcuterie room, "because it draws attention to the plight of rare and endangered breeds as an issue and their importance to genetic diversity - and, importantly, gastronomy."

Having been bred as an outdoor grazing animal, young Wessex saddlebacks have a particularly strong rooting instinct - they love to get their snouts in the ground and search for protein such as roots, bugs and worms.

Neff breeds his pigs on his farm at Tyabb on the Mornington Peninsula and sells his young pigs to a horse stud near Mount Eliza. After the horses have grazed the pastures for some time, the young pigs are let loose and turn over the soil, aerating it and fertilising as they go. After this the pasture is resown. While there, the pigs are fed a diet that includes milk whey, cooked potatoes and a mix of grains.

"What you notice about Wessex saddlebacks is that they really carry the flavour of what they have eaten in their fat," Neff says. "Which is why one has to be so particular about their feed."

Some Wessex saddleback breeders in the past have found themselves criticised for finishing their animals on feeds containing rancid oils that have then tainted the flavour of the meat. "We produce pork with very sweet fat," Neff says.

To demonstrate his point, he opens the door to his charcuterie room, a large space in an outbuilding with a half-dozen prosciutti hanging from the rafters. This is a man serious about his smallgoods.

Neff's parents were Swiss and he learnt the craft of smallgoods and charcuterie from the Swiss butchers he grew up near when his family moved to the outer suburbs of Melbourne. He made smallgoods every year with family and friends. Back then he bought his pig from "a bloke in Rosebud". A few years back, when



the latter became too old to grow pigs, Neff purchased his first Wessex saddleback and he has been slowly growing his herd since.

He takes out a professional meat slicer and cuts fine slices of pancetta, capocollo, prosciutto, lardo, smoked ham and bacon.

Fine-flavoured and succulent, his charcuterie has sweet, subtle and delicate fat, with flesh that has the developed deliciousness that comes from fine charcuterie-making. They are perhaps the best we have tasted in this country.

"You see, with Wessex saddleback you have a breed that is perfectly suited to these techniques," he says, pointing out a wonderfully thick layer of fat on a slice of pancetta.

Many of the techniques Neff uses were honed on a serendipitous trip to Italy three years ago. A visiting friend who lives in Tuscany took home some salami and passed it on to a local butcher. The result was an invitation to spend time with Danilo and Luciana Parti, from Macelleria Parti in San Donato, Poggio.

Neff has now commercialised his skills and makes charcuterie with a local registered butcher, selling a broad range to South Yarra restaurant France-Soir.

Its French chef, Geraud Fabre, says: "Kenneth is a very talented man. His charcuterie is exceptional." He adds, with a laugh: "But he was trained in Italy!"

Standing outside his home with Carl, a massive 300-kilogram boar, Neff reflects on the oft-posed question: why kill these animals if they are rare?

"Well, if there is no commercial demand for Wessex saddlebacks here in Australia," he says while brushing the grass off Carl's hairy back, "then they will go the way of the [extinct] herds in England."

Kenneth Neff will host charcuterie classes at his Tyabb farm on August 6-7 and 27-28. The cost is \$660.

See www.woolumbi.com for details.

Read more: <http://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/restaurants-and-bars/the-last-of-their-kind-20110723-1htnb.html#ixzz1T8I7M9Tw>