

WILD NOTES

The Handsome Hogs of East Mountain Farm

A few miles north of Wild Oats Market, on Henderson Road in Williamstown, **East Mountain Farm** sits on 130-plus acres, most of them wooded but with enough pasture for farmer Kim Wells to keep a small herd of Hereford cattle and flock of cornish rock broiler chickens. Kim uses the woodland acreage for raising pigs – about 40 in all, of various heritage breeds like Tamworth, Berkshire and Old Spot. The fortunate pigs of East Mountain occupy most of the farm's real estate, living on its extensive woodland, where they forage freely to their heart's content.

A Williams graduate, Kim started farming while on a college break. After he graduated, he spent three years working on a cattle farm in Kentucky. When he was ready to look for a farm of his own, he turned his attention back to the Northeast; and in 1982 he and his wife purchased a dilapidated, abandoned dairy farm in Williamstown from the Federal Land Bank. "Back when we bought it, the interest rate on our mortgage was 16%." (Proof that not every change is for the worse.)

East Mountain Farm began selling meat around 1987. At the time, Kim had a small dairy herd, and his first meat for sale was veal. From there, he moved onto raising pigs and cattle for pork and beef.

When East Mountain started selling meat, there were limited local USDA-regulated facilities for the area's

farmers to bring their animals for processing. "The slaughtering was often done on the farm by butchers who were self-employed. We sold our meat to private customers, who would order a side of beef or side of pork from us," says Kim, shaking his head as he remembers some of the characters he met while searching for qualified custom butchers.



Two-month old pigs in the East Mountain barn. Pigs are weaned at 6 weeks and move to the woods a few weeks later.

New meat processing facility creates opportunities for local farmers. In 2005, the Eagle Bridge Custom Meat and Smokehouse opened in nearby Eagle Bridge, New York, giving East Mountain Farm local access to a professional processing facility where meat was USDA in-

spected and USDA processed. Instead of selling whole sides of meat as special orders, Kim could now sell USDA certified meat, which meant he could sell by the piece to retailers. He began doing just that, selling meat to Wild Oats Market, to local chefs and restaurants, at farmers' markets, and in farm stores at Mighty Food and on his own farm. He still has private customers who order sides of meat, and now sells an average of 80 pigs a year, along with 1,100 chickens and 12 cattle (as many as his pasture will support).

Pigs + cattle + chickens = a good combination. "Chickens improve the soil for the cattle, which is why many farmers raise them together," says Kim, adding

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Life in the Great Outdoors Is Good for Pigs and Pork

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that with his farm's topography, raising pigs also makes good sense. He raises heritage breed pigs because he considers them more flavorful, as do most chefs. Like their ancestors, East Mountain pigs enjoy feeding on whatever their gifted snouts can find; and the flavor of their meat is enhanced in the way that nature intended. They also feed on grain that is a mix of soy and corn; whey from Gammelgarden Creamery in Pownal, Vermont; and compost made up of 100% food products from Mezza Bistro+Bar in Williamstown.

East Mountain chickens range free throughout the farm's pasture. The chickens are also fed grain, but their feed is limited, forcing them to forage more aggressively for bugs and grass. The shelters for the chickens are moved every day, and the birds follow their shelters to the new part of the pasture.

Fussy about feed. Kim emphasizes that "The quality of the grain is a big part of the equation." He buys local grain from a grain store in Schaghticoke, New York, choosing to buy from this supplier only. "The Schaghticoke store can tell me who they bought their corn and other grain products from and everything that goes into their feed. They make good products. And they understand what I am trying to do as a farmer."

Kim has not had much demand from his customers for organic meat. "Feeding my animals organic grain would easily double the price of the meat," he says. He chooses to buy local grain from a trusted source; and this year, he is hopeful that he will be able to say that his grain is GMO-free.

"Up until now GMO-free grain was not available for purchase unless you went organic," he explains. "The best you could do was to buy conventional grain that was locally produced, or GMO-free corn." Farmers like Kim have been persistent in asking for GMO-free grain, and as a result grain stores are now moving toward meeting this demand.

"The trick is getting GMO-free soybeans," says Kim, pointing out that soybeans are grown mostly in the Midwest, and that grain stores in the Northeast have less control over where they get their soybeans than over

where they get their corn.

Going GMO-free will raise the price of Kim's feed by approximately 10-20%. It's a significant increase, but nothing like the increase he would see with organic grain, which is double the price of conventional grain.

A satisfied customer. Wild Oats Market buys primarily pork from East Mountain Farm, although it also offers East Mountain chickens on occasion. With the addition



of a meat room in 2013, Wild Oats is able to cut and package pork in-house. East Mountain delivers sides of pig to the co-op fresh from the Eagle Bridge processing facility. Wild Oats also sells East Mountain rack of ribs and other cuts in its Frozen Meats section. The co-op grinds its own meat, offering ground pork and house-made sausages in its Fresh and Frozen Meats sections. During the holidays, Wild Oats offers East Mountain boneless hams to order.

Humane values govern the farm and give each animal a good life. Kim's overriding goals are to take care of his animals as best he can, and to produce the best-tasting and highest quality meat possible. His chickens are outdoors as much as they want to be. His pigs enjoy the freedom of the woodland like their wild ancestors. His cattle are entirely pasture raised, from start to finish. His animals are processed at a local, Animal Welfare Approved meat processing facility that prides itself on quality products and humane handling. "It's a lot of work!" Kim says with a smile. "But I'm proud of the way I care for my animals, and I'm proud of the products I sell."