

LEFT: Young Mangalitsa pigs are weaned at two months and then spend another 20 months or more growing, eating and foraging on the land.

RIGHT: Mangalitsa (known as Mangalica in Hungarian) is a lard-type pig that was first bred in 1833. It is the only woolly pig in the world and also the fattiest one.



Mangalitsa pigs fill a specialty niche for farm

Southern Alberta family raises the pigs for two years in their natural environment, where they eat an all-plant ration and are grass pastured

It's not unusual to run across free-ranging pigs in parts of Alberta, but one particular breed is sure to catch the eye.

Mangalitsa (known as Mangalica in Hungarian) is a lard-type pig that was first bred in 1833, in a farm that belonged to Habsburg royalty. It is the only woolly pig in the world and also the fattiest one. And one small farm in southern Alberta is devoted to raising these gentle giants for breeding stock and for their meat.

After conducting research on the Mangalitsa, Christina Stender with Eh Farms near Strathmore was intrigued and fell in love with the breed. She looked forward to the challenge and opportunity of bringing in the red Mangalitsas and building the breed in Canada. Eh Farms was the first farm to import the Red Mangalitsa into Canada.

In November 2016, Stender imported a 15-month-old first-generation pregnant gilt and a boar from California, whose parents had been imported from Hungary.

"We brought in a pregnant gilt that we named ZsaZsa, and a boar that we named Hampton," said Stender, who with husband Andy and sons Aubrey and Easton raise not only Mangalitsa pigs but also chickens.

"We had our first litter on Jan. 6, 2017, with six piglets. On average our litters have ranged from eight to 10 piglets, but we did have a litter with 13 little bacon bits. Oh, my, that was exciting and crazy."

A "surrogate farrower," Stender sleeps in the barn with the new mommas for the first three days, "making sure nobody gets squished."

Today, the number of Mangalitsa pigs on Eh Farms ranges between 40 and 50 at any time. The pigs are raised for two years in their natural environment, eating an all-plant-based ration, grass-pastured, and a fodder-enhanced diet through the winter.

The Mangalitsa pig breed was once almost extinct during Hungary's communist era. Stender said she is working hard to keep the

breed pure and follows the Hungarian National Association of Mangalica Breeders breeding program.

While Eh Farms raises red Mangalitsa pigs, there are actually three types of the breed, differing only by colour: blonde, red and swallow-bellied (originally produced by crossing the blonde Mangalitsa with the extinct black Mangalitsa).

The Mangalitsa pig's wool is coarse and wiry to the touch. Stender said the hair was used to make waterproof coats in the 1830s. Today, some are using the hair for fly tying.

Aside from their unique woolly coat, Stender said the Mangalitsa is the perfect pig and is world-renowned for charcuterie because of its unique fat said to melt in the mouth. The meat, meanwhile, is dark red, very marbled and very flavourful, unique in taste.

The meat-to-fat ratio is an average 40-60, said Stender, with much of the flavour coming from the fat.

"The fat itself is white and silky, melts even below body temperature (32 C), and it contains lots of omega 3 and 6, as well as omega 9, vitamin D and antioxidants. The lard is rich in monounsaturated fat, considered a good fatty acid," said Stender. "The Mangalitsa is totally different and you can't compare it to other pork."

Mangas are known for their free-range, foraging and natural diet.

"These local pigs forage around our Alberta farm, eating a natural diet filled with vegetables, fruits and grains, (wheat, peas and barley) in addition to the nutrients they find on the ground," said Stender. "Because the pigs spend most of their time in the pasture snacking, they get nice and plump, a key part in what makes their meat so tasty. During the winter months when it's white, not green, I supplement them with an oat, wheat and barley fodder that we grow here on the farm in our garage."

Unlike other commercial pigs, Mangalitsas add weight gradually. Stender said she raises her pigs to the age of 21 to 24 months before they are slaughtered. At this age,

they typically weigh about 330 to 385 pounds rail weight. For meat production, male and female pigs are treated the same. Around three months before they are slaughtered, they are finished on a barley diet.

Stender takes particular care with the lard that is harvested from the pigs. Leaf lard, which protects the organs of the pig, is great for making pastry. The belly fat, also known as the bacon location, is kept intact and is also good for cooking. Stenders said the back fat, also known as the "healthy lard" of pigs, is essential in every kitchen for cooking.

Stender has no problem finding customers for her Mangalitsa meat and lard.

"Because my herd is still young, I have sold a few whole and half Mangas to select restaurants in Calgary and Banff, as well as to some Hungarian families," she said. "I market smaller cuts like chops, bacon, roasts and hams — you name the cut and I can get it done for you. I sell mostly these cuts from our on-farm Mangalitsa Heaven meat shop. Larger cuts like whole shoulders and the hind leg are getting more popular as more people are doing charcuterie."

The Mangalitsa breed is gentle by nature, which makes raising them a family affair. The Stender family spend part of each day with the pigs to ensure they are socializing well with each other and with their human keepers.

"I think because I am with them from birth and they don't have the choice — I am always handling them and cuddling with them — they get use to me and don't mind me touching them," said Stender. "Of course, there are some that like it more than others."

Does that make it hard to decide who stays on to breed and who goes for meat?

"At a young age, I don't really know which will be going to breeding stock or place in our meat program," she said. "Other than the males, I have to choose early and decide who gets to be my replacement boar. For the females, I decide

Christina Stender says the Mangalitsa breed is gentle by nature. She and her family spend part of each day with them to ensure they are socializing well with each other and with their human keepers. | [REDACTED]

PHOTOS

this at around 12 months old at time of breeding. At that time, I look at breed-specific characteristics."

The boars are kept in large pens alone and when a female is in heat, Stender brings her to the boar for three days, morning and night. They don't stay together around the clock.

As for the others, the barrows, gilts and sows are all together in different groups. The young pigs are weaned at two months and then spend another 20 months or more growing, eating and foraging on the land.

Because the pigs are kept outside, Stender said Mangalitsas are naturally more resilient to health concerns and they generally don't require special care.

"I work with my Mangas every single day from when they are born till the day they are harvested," said Stender. "Saying goodbye or butchering an animal is never easy, but it gives me comfort that my Mangas had a good quality of life. And in the end, I am proud that after all that hard work I get a beautiful, healthy, flavourful animal that I get to share with others."

