

## **Big chops — Barthel's grass-fed pork sells itself**

**By Dick Hagen**

The Land Staff Writer

"When my wife brings a plate of these pork chops to the table it's the most beautiful meal you've ever looked at," said Tom Barthel of Becker, Minn. "Fresh off the grill the taste is incredible. My customers love them. The best proof is that there is virtually 100 percent reorder year after year." Barthel and his wife live on Snake River Farm, raising "Bison, Cattle, Hogs and Damn Fine Horses" according to their business card. He specializes in naturally raised bison, beef and pork. He direct markets to a growing list of consumers. Those chops he spoke of are big, too. Barthel grows his pigs big — up to 500 pounds live-weight; hanging carcass weights are in the 320- pound category. Because he grows his hogs on pasture with limited corn in the grain ration, those animals are well-muscled and remarkably lean.



**Tom Barthel**

What is also remarkable is the fact that Barthel never advertises his "grass-fed" pork yet he sells more pork than his beef and bison combined. "Customers come to us off the 'Minnesota Grown' directory, or often word-of-mouth," he said. "They're looking for bison or grass-fed beef but after the second or third year experiencing our meats, they're ready to buy some pork. After that first experience, reselling our pork just happens. Yes, they still are buying beef or bison but pork is automatic." He is now 11 years in the business. "I'd say the recipe is proven," he said. "It works."

Interviewed at the Organic Food Conference at St. Cloud, Minnesota, Barthel shared a few of his strategies for natural production using non-GMO oats, wheat and some corn. Pasture forage is a major part of the naturally produced meats from Snake River Farm.

His pastures are indeed workhorses — he rotates pastures for his hogs every two to three days. "At an organic conference about 10 years, Joel Salatin, probably the best known farmer in America was talking pasture rotations. I was just doing bison and beef at that time. Feeding the bison through the winter on a 20-acre pasture, putting hay on the same feeding area. I do not do that anymore. But this guy had a message about running hogs on the manure pack. This was a holistic conference. It sounded like an idea worth trying. I put a few hogs on pasture that first year. They did really well. I have added more hogs each year. Grass-fed beef and grass-fed bison customers were ready to buy grass-fed hogs also."

He started custom direct marketing and continues so today. He sells under the "custom/exempt" allowance in state law which means quarters for beef and bison, halves for hogs and lambs. However if his beef or bison are marketed totally for ground meat, then state regulators permit selling by the 1/10th. Last year he marketed 104 hogs. His system requires four separate pastures. Rather than corn, his pigs get a high oat diet because, as Barthel put it, "I want to slow them down. I do not care about rate of gain. I care much more about animal welfare and quality of the meat. Oats are about 11 percent protein compared with 8 percent for corn. I am now feeding wheat which is 13 percent to 14 percent protein. When these pigs are young, they get just enough soybean meal to meet their requirements. They soon outgrow that until there's little or no soybean meal."

Barthel has no more than 30 pigs in a pasture for social reasons. "More than that and they start to pick on each other," he said, "and you more than likely have a disadvantaged hog in that bunch. Hogs are not

herd animals like beef and bison. They are more like people — they look out for themselves. I do not put them into pastures however until they are well-socialized. And if there are any poor doers, I pull those out into a separate pen.” Barthel used to farrow his own pigs but now buys 20- to 25-pound weaners. “I want to make it easy for myself,” he said. “So I buy little pigs in April. I purchase out of a confinement system. I want a uniform, quality pig. Unfortunately, they have ear tattoos and their tails have been cut off. I nurture them for a few weeks then get them on our pastures.”



**Hogs grazing rye pasture planted in September. The “white” on the leaves is early morning frost. The white tape is electrified fence with easily moved, step in posts.**

He has tried a variety of pasture mixes but has good success with canary grass, bluegrass and clovers. He also plants oats, rye and peas seasonably. His pigs pasture mainly on paddocks with organic soils. Erosion simply is not an issue. He steers clear of pesticides which he considers soil contaminants. “What my pigs are eating out there is mostly weeds and grassy plants,” Barthel said. “They’ll shred that ... eat all the greens the first day. If I leave them another day they are chewing around the roots and anything living under the soil surface. Then they start moonscaping ... that cozy term for pigs rooting into the soil digging and foraging. “I’ll drag those pastures in the fall leveling them off again before drilling the next spring. Hogs do not need a lot of space. Two to three acres is enough pasture space for 30 pigs. We rotate them through the entire pasture at least twice each season.” Additional nourishment is an oat filled self-feeder. “They can eat all they want,” he said, “sort of like eating at a salad bar. Because they’re on pasture, they get lots of exercise which leads to better muscle texture and flavor with less fat.” In order to spread out the marketing season in 2013, he started harvesting in October and got an average 280 pound hanging weight. That is lighter than his preference which is about a 320-pound hanging weight. His hogs averaged over 300 pounds hanging weight the three previous years when harvested in late November. That means pigs up to 500 pounds live weight. He said most university literature encourages marketing below 300 pounds live weight for better economics. “But that’s the processor doing the docking on these heavier pigs. It has nothing to do with meat quality and taste,” Barthel said. “Even my local butcher that first year thought my 500-pound pigs would be too fat. But they were not. They get

lots of exercise. That oat diet slows them down so they are growing muscle rather than fat. And yes, those pork chops are enormous.”

Growing pigs based on customer demand conveniently controls inventory. Talking with Barthel in January, he said he did not yet own any pigs but had 15 sold from his newsletter emailed to customers the previous week. “By March I’ll probably have 80 to 90 pigs sold and I still won’t own any. It is a good way to do a farming business. My customers determine my inventory. I don’t have any left-over hogs at the end of the season.” Quality Meats at Foley, Minnesota, does the processing for Snake River Farm. As of March 7, Barthel said his customer order spreadsheet indicated 82.5 hogs. Based on past years he predicts orders will total 138 hogs for 2014. Last year Snake River Farm also sold 84 beef, 17 bison and 12 lambs.



**Running for fun in early snow. Athletic, 400 pound pigs, grown on pasture, wheat and oats.**

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