

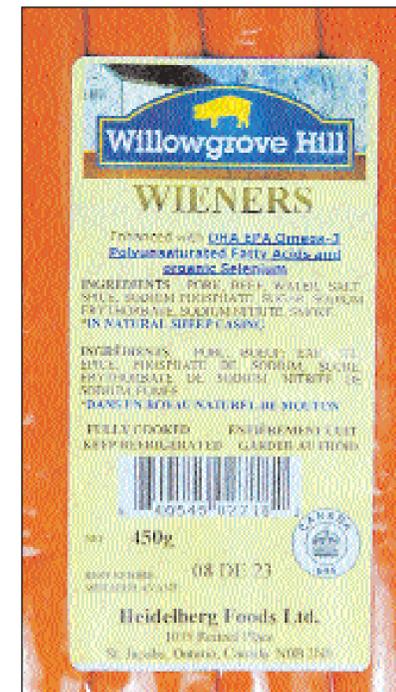
■ **AGRICULTURE:** Two Perth County farmers find success with different pork products



Chef Henry Stobbe holds a wild boar burger outside the Boar's Head pub in Stratford. The pub at the inn also serves wild boar chili.



Rosie and Paul Hill show off some of their Willowgrove Hill pork products that are enhanced with Omega-3 fatty acids.



Willowgrove Hill pork wieners are enhanced with omega-3 fatty acids.

Photos by DEREK RUTTAN derek.ruttan@sunmedia.ca



Wild boar feed on black walnuts at Fred de Martines' farm. The meal gives a preferred nutty flavour to the animal's meat.

Taking their sweet swine

BY HANK DANISZEWSKI
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SEBRINGVILLE — They're ugly, sometimes nasty and dimwitted, but darned tasty.

Wild boars, the ancient ancestors of the farmyard pig, were a creative alternative back in 1992 when Fred and Ingrid de Martines wanted to find a niche market to supplement their commercial hog operation.

"We had done everything we could do with the regular pigs. All we could do was get bigger or try something else," said de Martines, a native of the Netherlands who is a trained swine specialist.

The de Martines went looking for wild boars and found some breeding stock at a farm near Grand Bend.

Sixteen years later they are raising about 100 head and find boar meat is still a hot commodity, especially with chefs in posh restaurants in Toronto and Stratford who serve wild boar as a delicacy.

"I'm always getting calls for them. I can sell as many as I raise," said Fred, who farms northwest of Stratford.

Wild boars live up to their name

because they are naturally hardy and need minimal shelter, living in fenced-in enclosures rather than barns.

But boars take much longer than commercial pigs to reach market weight and de Martines has to do his own marketing.

His best local customer is the Queen's Inn in Stratford, where boar burgers and boar chili are a popular item in the Boar's Head pub.

De Martines said that despite their fearsome reputation, the boars are not that hard to handle.

"They can be if you don't treat them right. You don't try to push them around," he said.

These days the boars are chowing down on a special treat — black walnuts.

Linda Walton, a friend of the de Martines, visited a farm in Germany where wild boars were turned out into the Black Forest to eat walnuts, a practice that gives the meat a "nuttier" flavour.

That appealed to the chefs who bought boar from the de Martines.

Walton took her quest for walnuts to the local newspaper, the Stratford Beacon-Herald, and ended

picking up 10 tonnes from sixty homeowners and hauling them all to the de Martines farm in her family van.

Even though walnuts are a natural food for wild boars, who are native to the woods of Europe and Asia, Walton had to teach them to eat the walnuts.

"At first we just tossed them in

“People want to know where their pork comes from. They want it local and they want it healthy.”

Pork producer Paul Hill

and they just rolled them around like tennis balls," said Walton.

Walton then tried cracking the husks and throwing the nuts to the boars. But the boars didn't catch on until she put the nuts back into the cracked husks.

Walton said the cracking and popping sounds made by the boars as they chomp on the walnuts will be used as background sound for the

farm's website

The de Martines also get free feed from the community for their Tamworth pigs, a rare breed prized by gourmets because they have a higher fat content. Ten Stratford restaurants send their vegetable clippings to the farm to feed the Tamworths.

De Martines also has about 1,000 head of commercial pigs, but he is glad to have the boars and the Tamworths as an alternative.

Ontario's pork industry has been hammered by low prices in recent years and although there has been some improvement, de Martines said producers still are not meeting their cost of production.

A federal program paid pork producers to reduce the size of the herds to firm up prices.

But now Ontario producers are being hit by a new United States program requiring processors to have a "country of origin" label on food products. That is expected to cut into Ontario's once-profitable export market into the United States.

Just up the road near the town of Mitchell, pork producers Paul and Rosie Hill were wondering how to

deal with the volatile pork market and developed their own unique product.

By using a special feed infused with fish oil, the Hills have produced pork enriched with DHA and EPA omega-3 fatty acid that promotes good cardiovascular health.

Omega-3 is an essential nutrient found naturally in fish and flax seed, but is now used to enrich milk and egg products.

The Hills' interest in healthier food began with a family tragedy. In 2001, their son Ryan was only two years old when he died of liver cancer. That left the couple wondering about any possible exposures that could have triggered their son's cancer.

"You're lying awake wondering about what you are eating," said Rosie.

Two years ago, the Hills started revamping their 500-sow commercial swine herd, moving to a breed that has more fat marbling and better flavour.

"For years consumers have demanded leaner pork, but the flavour was coming out. We put the flavour back in, but the omega-3 is a healthier fat," said Paul.

They also worked with Grand Valley Fortifiers, a feed mill in Cambridge, to develop the omega-3 feed, which is also rich in selenium, an element that boosts the immune system. The Hills also raise their pigs without the use of antibiotics.

They have developed their own packaging and brand — Willowgrove Hill. Last month they introduced their brand at the Grocery Innovations Canada trade show in Toronto.

Rory Golden, executive chef at the Deerhurst resort, uses the Willowgrove products and did cooking demonstrations at the show.

The Hills have already lined up some premium independent grocers to carry their product, including Remark Fresh Market in London and several outlets in Toronto.

Paul said developing the omega-3 pork allows the couple to offer a premium local product.

"People want to know where their pork comes from. They want it local and they want it healthy," he said.

Hank Daniszewski is a Free Press business reporter.