

Picture Pork-Fit

Local farmer makes good out of the functional food trend

By Jim Robinson, Protein Category Manager for Gordon Food Service®



Paul Hill grew up like thousands of other Ontario rural boys, in the shadow of his father, learning how to raise hogs on the family farm in Mitchell, Ontario. At age 11, he lost his father to a heart attack, not knowing this would have an influence many years later on the type of farmer he would choose to be.

As a young man, Paul led the expansions of the Willowgrove Hill family farm to 80 sows in 1988, 350 sows in 1996 and ultimately to 500 sows in 2006. He met and married Rosie, who earned a diploma in foodservice management, giving them insight into the end use of their product. It was a match made in heaven in more ways than one. Together they faced the trials and tribulations of the volatile Ontario pork market.

In 2001, a tragic event changed the course of their lives forever. Their child Ryan passed away from liver cancer at the age of two. That left Paul and Rosie wondering about any possible exposures that could have triggered their son's illness. It was the final impetus to make their product as healthy as possible to ensure their family and their customers had lifestyle choices without sacrificing great taste.

The Hills began working feverishly with nutritionists at Grand Valley Fortifiers in Cambridge to design the right feed mix for their "healthier hogs." One of the "secret ingredients" ended up being a human-grade Omega-3 fish oil, which is a recognized best source of DHA and EPA, a success story they had observed in watching the Ontario egg producers. In recent years, DHA/EPA Omega-3 fatty acids have been linked in various international studies over recent years to reduced risks of coronary heart disease and certain cancers, while supporting the normal development of the eyes, brain and nerves. It is possible to get Omega-3's from some vegetables and beans, however the human body absorbs these nutrients much more efficiently from proteins such as fish or pork. While Omega-3's are found naturally in fish, the average Canadian only eats fish once every 12 days, making it imperative to augment other proteins with this essential fatty acid. Organic selenium was also added to the feed mix, as it is well known as a trace material linked to strengthening the immune system and reducing the risks of breast, colon and prostate cancers.



Paul and Rosie restocked the Willowgrove Hill hogs with Topigs for the maternal line and Tempo on the paternal side. This gave them the unique combination of well-marbled, better tasting meat with sturdiness and high resistance to disease. "It's now a fattier, better-tasting animal, but a healthier one as well," states Paul. The Hills took the enhancements even further by raising their pigs without antibiotics and free of growth promotants, thus reducing both the risks to humans and the environment. Even some of Paul's hog-farming friends buy his products from his farmgate store.

Like many of the popular pork products in our market today, Willowgrove Hill pork cuts qualify as "lean" when trimmed of visible fat. In fact, a 90-gram serving of pork tenderloin has less cholesterol than a skinless chicken breast. Another fact that sets Willowgrove Hill Farms apart is the humane treatment of their animals. The pigs are raised above and beyond federal and provincial standards in state-of-the-art barns that are well lit and climate controlled with modern air circulation techniques that are essential for comfort and animal health.

Seeking to expand their market influence beyond limited retail distribution and a handful of restaurants, Willowgrove Hill approached Gordon Food Service® in Ontario about a partnership to expose the product to the thousands of restaurateurs that GFS services in the province. "It's going to take some time for operators to understand the reasons for the phenomenal pricing of this amazing product" says GFS Category Manager Jim Robinson, "but we also said that about Certified Angus Beef® and we'll sell almost ten million dollars of that line this year alone". Gordon Food Service has listed five key

Willowgrove Hill products to begin with – bacon, pulled pork, pork loin, sausages and Frenched pork chops. Rory Golden, Executive Chef at Deerhurst Resort was one of the first adapters to the new line of products. "We have definitely encountered some challenges along the way but I'm passionate about our superior product and we will find ways to overcome" says Paul.

Today, the Willowgrove Hill Farm product line-up is at the forefront of the functional food movement for the pork industry by providing fresh, locally produced foods. Both Willowgrove and GFS are confident that restaurant operators will feel good about promoting a local producer for both the economy and the environment. ■

