

They're Creating New "Heritage" Hog Breeds

By Jim Ruen, Contributing Editor

Travis Hood is creating two new hog breeds from "old" stock that he says will taste better than modern breeds and grow faster than heritage breeds. With the help of specialty hog breeder Carl Blake, he is combining old bloodlines in a new way.

"We started crossing our bloodlines in early 2015, and we are already seeing positive results," says Hood. "I'm tired of feeding my heritage breed hogs for 8 to 10 months and marketing at 11 1/2 months. I want a hog that will be ready to market at 7 1/2 months or less with 30-lb. hams and well-marbled meat. I want bigger shoulders, a longer loin and larger hams."

Blake, Hood's breeding partner, is looking for the ultimate 110-lb. roasting pig that will be well marbled and ready for market in less than 13 weeks. It will have wide shoulders and a medium-size ham. Fat covering and marbling is a must.

"I want a pig that I can roast with the skin off and the outside layer of fat will caramelize and taste like candy," says Blake.

The two goals are worlds apart in some respects, but both rely on a common breeding base. Hood is using Blake's Swabian Hall breed (Vol. 33, No. 4) derived from a cross of the Chinese Meishan breed and European Wild Boar. He is crossing these with his own Andrus Red Wattle hogs.

Combining the bloodlines will produce a broad genetic base. From that, Hood will select desired traits for each breeding goal. He has picked out the name Kentucky Wattle for his goal. Blake's breed will be selected for characteristics of an old Italian breed called Sienna Gray and called the same.

"It was developed for use as a roasting pig and for charcuterie, cooked, cured and smoked meats like pancetta and prosciutto,"

says Hood. "They were black with a band of white hair on black pigment skin. They look a bit like a Hampshire on the outside, but very different with more marbling inside."

Hood also wants longer heads on Blake's Sienna Grays. He explains that a delicacy often overlooked in American hogs is the cheek steak found right under the eye. "With most breeds, they are no bigger than a silver dollar, but I am aiming for one that is 4 to 5 in. across," he says.

His Kentucky Wattles will be similar to his current Red Wattle, but more prolific, more productive and as described, mature faster. Part of that faster maturation will allow him to breed females at younger ages, speeding the reproductive process.

He also hopes his new breed will be better mothers than his Red Wattles. He notes that Blake's Swabian Hall are more on the wild side with more mothering instinct, better foraging and housekeeping.

"I want sows with at least 12 viable teats and the ability to wean an average of 12 piglets in 8 weeks," says Hood. "None of my heritage breeds can do that."

He is mixing in a little Hereford blood, another heritage breed he maintains. "Herefords have stronger legs placed out at the corners for more strength," says Hood. "The Red Wattle has relatively weak legs tucked under the body. The Hereford also has a big ham. I don't like their attitude and disposition, but the meat is fantastic."

With his Red Wattles, Hood has found his best marbled meat when the animal reaches about 310 to 330 lbs., usually around 9 months. With the Kentucky Wattle, he is shooting for the same degree of marbling at 245 to 260 lbs. at 6 months.

"They may produce a 3/4-lb. chop instead



Travis Hood is creating 2 new hog breeds that he says grow faster than heritage breeds. Photo shows a first generation cross weighing 180 lbs. at 17 weeks.

of 1 1/4, but they'll both fry themselves in a pan with no added grease," says Hood.

According to Hood, what the new Sienna Gray and the Kentucky Wattle will share is deep red, well-marbled meat and wattles. A wattle is kidney-shaped flesh that dangles at the corner of each jaw. While its purpose on pigs is unknown, Hood is using them for external markers of the type of pigs he wants for both breeds.

"Out of 43 piglets born from the various crosses, 42 of them had both wattles," says Hood.

Once some of the hogs are butchered out, he'll see how closely he has met his goals. He expects it will take around about 3 years of selection and rebreeding to define the Sienna Gray and Kentucky Wattle by meat color, marbling and productivity. External characteristics are secondary.

With only one set of second generation pigs on the ground, Hood is excited with what he is seeing. When a young boar developed

a hernia, he was castrated and ran with the sows on pasture. Meanwhile his littermates were in the nearby paddock.

"They had unlimited access to feed, but he matched them in growth with 1/3 the ration," says Hood.

The bad news for wanna-be Kentucky Wattle or Sienna Gray breeders is neither Hood nor Blake intend to sell breeding stock. While that may change in the future, for now they expect to have more market than they can fill.

"When I go to the farmers market, I have a line of people waiting for my pork chops," says Hood. "I can sell out 165 lbs. of pork chops for \$10 per pound in under an hour. I need better genetics that will let fewer sows produce more pigs faster to fill the demand."

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Guinea Hog Breed Starting To Flourish

The American Guinea Hog has come a long way since FARM SHOW featured the breed in 2007 (Vol. 31, Issue 1). At the time there were only five active breeders, and the landrace breed was considered critically rare.

It's still rare, but the hogs are now available in most states. Thanks to homesteaders interested in growing their own food and spreading the word on social media, guinea hogs have their own association, the American Guinea Hog Association (AMHA) with more than 5,000 registered animals.

"What caused them to almost go extinct is what now makes them popular - their small size and high fat," says Deborah Niemann-Boehle, a board member of AGHA, who raises the pigs on a small acreage in Illinois. "Chefs are going crazy for them. They buy a whole pig and break it down to use it all."

The breed's 250 to 300-lb. mature weight is easier for hobby farmers to handle, compared with hog breeds two and three times as big.

"Their personality is amazing," adds Niemann-Boehle. "Many pigs are mean, but these are so docile and so sweet. They like belly rubs. We keep the boars with sows sometimes, and they are nice with the babies."

The heritage pig was developed as a landrace breed in the southeast. They're only 22 to 27 in. tall and fatten easily so it is important not to overfeed them. They're hardy and do well on pasture. Their most defining characteristic is color - all black with occasional white spots on the feet or nose. Because they're a landrace, variations

are common on snout shapes and hip size, for example.

"They love grass and garden produce and we feed them alfalfa hay and brewers grain in the winter," Niemann-Boehle says. They also love acorns and hickory nuts. When there is plenty of food, they don't root, she notes. In late fall, she pens them in an area where they can be fed.

Sows typically have litters of 6 to 10, and the babies are only about 1 lb. Because of their tiny size, the Illinois couple avoids having litters born in the winter. The breed is hardy, however, and they have never had to deworm their herd, though some other breeders do. Within a year, pigs will be about 100 lbs. hanging weight.

"I never cared for pork chops before, but I love these pork chops," Niemann-Boehle says. "They are more flavorful and moist."

American Guinea Hogs also have about 15 to 20 percent fat, which she freezes and renders into lard as she needs it.

"If you are interested in self-sufficiency, having pigs is the easiest way to produce your own cooking fat," she says.

With more animals now available, prices have come down to about \$200 for a weaned 2 or 3-month-old piglet. With shelter they do well in all climates.

People interested in more information or finding a breeder should check out the AGHA website.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, American Guinea Hog Association (www.guineahogs.org).



The American Guinea hog breed is still rare, but starting to flourish. Their 250 to 300-lb. mature weight makes the animals easier for hobby farmers to handle.

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