



HOG HEAVEN

BY JENNIFER CHANDLER

Venture into the home kitchen of Chef Reinaldo Alfonso as he perfects his recipes in the lost art of charcuterie

When Reinaldo Alfonso (known as Reny to friends) opens the door to his garage, the most amazing smell emanates. A cross between smoky and sweet, it smells like the best bacon you have ever eaten.

And why does Reny have the most aromatic garage in town? It is because of his newfound hobby of charcuterie. Reny has been curing bacon, salamis, chorizo and Westphalian hams for the past two years.

So how did the chef de cuisine at The Peabody Hotel's Chez Philippe, where he is known for his French Asian fusion cuisine, fall into a hobby of German/Austrian heritage? "I grew up eating Argentinean-style sausages. My dad used to mail me fresh sausages, but the postage was getting really expensive," Reny explained, "so I decided to try to make them myself."

Though Reny has found his niche in both French and Asian fare, his earliest culinary experiences were born of his Cuban heritage. Raised in Miami, the son of Cuban parents, his relationship with food began at his grandmother's elbow, preparing Cuban favorites like *ropa vieja* and *natilla*. "I have a passion for food and love to cook for others," Reny explains.

So about the time he decided to make homemade sausages, his friend Konrad Spitzbart, executive pastry chef at The Peabody Hotel, invited him to go on a vacation to his family's farm back in Austria.

Konrad's family farm specializes in raising pork. His mother regularly prepares a smorgasbord of items using the whole pig. Reny gets a hungry look in his eye as he reminisces about his first meal in her kitchen when he was treated to a huge platter of headcheese, cured meats and fresh sausages. "I learned a lot when I was over there," ex-

plains Reny, "I learned old-school, traditional recipes that use all natural ingredients."

As he started his new hobby, Reny found there weren't many resources for making charcuterie at home. "It's a dying art," says Reny, "Many of the books are out of print." He spent a lot of time on the internet looking for recipes, sources for ingredients and equipment. He feels lucky to have found several out-of-print books on charcuterie at a small, used book store in Manhattan.

He started by building his own smoker. Made out of wood, this refrigerator-size box cold smokes his meats. He then rigged an old freezer to be his curing box. A gardener who has a hydroponic garden helped him develop a system to control the humidity and temperature.

As luck would have it, one of the leading heritage pork farmers in the country is just a few hours drive from Memphis in Missouri. Reny was drawn to Newman Farm when he discovered that some of the country's leading chefs, including Mario Batali, Alice Waters and Wolfgang Puck, bought pork from Mark Newman. Newman Farm specializes in heritage Berkshire pork raised naturally the old-fashioned way using sustainable and humane production standards.

Reny decided to buy a whole pig instead of just parts. His first pig was about 250 pounds: small by pig standards, but way too large to process in a small home kitchen. "Since I am developing all these recipes to eventually be on my menu at Chez Philippe, I process the pig at the hotel," he explained. He makes all of the fresh sausages at the hotel, many of which occasionally appear on his menu.

The cured meats he makes at home. "I don't want to ask the hotel to invest in smoking and curing equipment until I have perfected my recipes," he added. His cured meats won't find their way onto his menu until they are made at the restaurant, but he is happy to share with his friends in the interim.

Clockwise from top left: Reny and his smoking cabinet; pork belly and sausage during the smoking process; the finished product.



Berkshire hogs at Newman Farm.
Photo courtesy of Reinaldo Alfonso

“I did feel that it was important for my staff to come out to Newman Farm with me,” Reny commented, “In this country, most people, even chefs, are disattached from their food.” It is rare that a cook gets to process a whole animal. Ingredients arrive in a cardboard box butchered into ready-to-serve cuts.

“We spent a few days on the farm doing everything from feeding to slaughtering the pigs,” he explained, “It was an incredible experience.”

So back to Reny’s garage. In his curing box, currently, are two Westphalian hams, chorizo sausage, sopressata, Tuscan salami with fennel and peppercorn, a spicy Hungarian sausage with paprika, and Austrian-style bacons made from the belly, loin and shoulder. A cured meat lover’s paradise.

“The hard part is the waiting,” says Reny. His Westphalian hams will age for more than a year before he can taste their smoky, rich meat. The cured sausages take only about six weeks.

Now on his third pig, Reny is still perfecting the recipes. “I lost some of the meat my first couple of tries,” he explains, “I always check the pH. I won’t eat it if I think it is unsafe.”

From the samples that I tasted, I think that Reny is well on the way to having perfected his recipes. The Tuscan salami had a delicate flavor with hints of fennel and peppercorn and the Hungarian sausage offered a spicy, yet smoky flavor with a deliciously meaty texture. The bacon, sliced thin like prosciutto, was smoky and tender.

Newman Farm Heritage Berkshire Pork

Family-owned and operated, Newman Farm raises pastured pork in the Southern Ozarks near Myrtle, Missouri—around 140 miles from Memphis. Mark and Rita Newman raise their 100% Berkshire hogs without animal by-products, growth promotants, or sub-therapeutic antibiotics. The result is flavorful, meaty, marbled pork, sought out by top chefs and flavor-conscious consumers.

Newman Farm Heritage Berkshire Pork is available through Heritage Foods USA, a non-profit group dedicated to celebrating regional cuisines and products.

Newman Farm Heritage Berkshire Pork

www.newmanfarm.com

417-938-4391

Heritage Foods USA

www.heritagefoodsusa.com

212-980-6603

When tasting the sopressata, he asked me to compare the flavor to a commercial brand he had picked up at a New York gourmet market. There was no comparison. In Reny’s homemade version, you could taste the pork but in the commercial brand, the pork was overpowered by saltiness and the texture was much tougher. “Commercial brands must use more salt as a preservative as well as to ensure no loss in the curing process,” Reny explained.

As I was in hog heaven indulging on his handiwork, Reny pointed out “when pork is naturally raised it has more mono-unsaturated fat than its commercially-raised counterpart.” Nice to know that these divine pork treats could be considered healthy! *eM*

Like most Memphians, Jennifer Chandler grew up appreciating the pig for its crispy smoky-flavored bacon, salty country ham and spicy BBQ ribs. But when she was attending culinary school in Paris, she discovered a whole new meaning to pork....cured salamis, thinly sliced prosciutto hams and meaty bacons such as pancetta. To this day, a *saucisson sec* (dry-cured sausage), a wedge of stinky cheese and a crusty French baguette remain a favorite treat.

Taste Reny’s hotel-made sausage and other creations at

Chez Philippe at the Peabody Hotel

149 Union Avenue

901-529-4188