



# Lard Is Back In Fashion

*Falling from favour in the 1950s, succulent pork is striking back in the form of a woolly pig*



Mangalica winter salami carpaccio.

What do Franz Liszt, the Rubik's Cube, an edible national treasure, Harry Houdini and a pig that resembles a sheep have in common with one another? Well, all of them hail from Hungary and the edible national treasure is none other than the Mangalica – a pig with a thick, coarse, curly coat of fur that makes it look like a sheep at first glance. The fleecy coat helps protect the Mangalica from the cold weather of the Hungarian steppe where temperatures can drop to minus 30°C in winter. The fleece can be black or red, but is most commonly blond. It is the only pig that sports this unusual fleece – a result of Austro-Hungarian Emperor Franz Joseph crossing Hungarian and Serbian pigs in 1833.

## THE FALL FROM FAVOUR

The Mangalica's abundant lard sustained Hungarians during the Industrial Revolution but herds dwindled with the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire after the First

World War and shrank further when fast-growing breeds like the Large White and landrace, which are more suited for industrial farming, were introduced after the Second World War.

Until the Second World War, millions of the Mangalica were bred for its lard which was also used as raw material for processed products. Before the introduction of cheaper, better quality vegetable oils, lard was the cooking medium of choice before it fell from favour in the mid-20th century when modern science declared that saturated fats were harmful to human health. The Mangalica population dropped sharply in the 1950s as it became a victim of modernisation with industrial pig breeding taking flight. This exacted a heavy toll on the Mangalica as leaner and meatier breeds which grow faster began replacing it. The Mangalica requiring lots of space and access to the outdoors was not well-suited to the new intensive style of industrial farming. Furthermore, only five to eight piglets are produced

by the Mangalica instead of the 12 to 14 of more commonly raised breeds.

“We must slaughter them at 140kg to make sure that the marbling is maximised and the meat is of the best quality. If you slaughter it at 80kg (when industrially produced pigs are slaughtered), you won’t have marbled meat. You need time, more than one year, while a normal pig would require five months to raise,” illustrates animal geneticist Péter Tóth who is now also the president of Hungary’s National Association of Mangalica Pig Breeders.

Everything was working against this heritage pig. Farmers could not find any good reasons to continue raising the Mangalica and the advent of communism in Hungary further led more farmers to see it as a poor breeding choice because eating the Mangalica was deemed a bad habit.

After the fall of communism, the state farms serving as the last gene banks for the Mangalica also collapsed. By 1991, only 198 purebred Mangalica pigs remained in the world.

### REIGNITING THE HUNGER FOR HUNGARIAN HERITAGE PORK

This Hapsburg legacy was pulled back from the brink of extinction by Tóth who bought all of Hungary’s remaining Mangalica pigs, even rescuing some right from the abattoirs. To save the animal’s gene pool, the geneticist started a last-minute breeding operation that encouraged farmers to raise the Mangalica on pastureland in the traditional way. Cooperatives of farmers were formed to protect the breed. It took over 20 years to stabilise the population.

In 2004, the Hungarian parliament declared the Mangalica a national treasure because of its standing as Hungary’s cultural and culinary heritage. This treasure can be consumed and needly so in order to sustain its demand. Henceforth, the concept: “Saving by eating”.

Today, the Mangalica pigs are well out of the danger zone for extinction, numbering over 50,000 in Hungary. Close to half are maintained by private breeders and bred for home, private consumption. The rest are exported and served in Michelin-starred restaurants the world over. In Spain, it is made into ham and other cured meats because its fat-meat ratio is ideal for the long, air-cured process. As the Mangalica is limited, it is only available in four Asian countries, namely, Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore.

Consumers in Singapore seeking this juicy national treasure will be able to purchase it at Huber’s Butchery @ Dempsey (22 Dempsey Road; Tel: 6737 1588) in various configurations: salami (\$64/kg), Rakoczi salami (\$43/kg), winter salami (\$54/kg), pork chops (\$61/kg), pork belly (\$49/kg) and pork neck (\$73/kg). To bring out the best taste

and flavours of the Mangalica, the good people at Huber’s Butchery are always on hand to offer tips and pointers on preparing this delightful meat back home.

### MEAT QUALITY

Cousin to the black-footed Iberian, the Mangalica is one of the fattiest pigs in the world with a fat percentage well over 50 per cent, sometimes reaching 70 per cent. The lean meat is only 38 to 40 per cent, compared to over 50 per cent in modern breeds.

Considered among the tastiest pork in the world, the reddish meat of the Mangalica pork is highly marbled with creamy white fat which is more than double the marbling of average pork. Comparing to regular white pig meat, the Mangalica has 12 to 16 per cent less saturated fatty acids and 8 to 10 per cent more unsaturated fatty acids, which is why Mangalica lard is lighter and melts at a lower temperature than lard from other pigs. This composition is due to its natural diet of green fodder, wheat, maize, alfalfa grass, barley and sometimes, pumpkin and sugar beet combined with sunflower. The sunflower contributes much to the high amount of good fatty acids and minerals in the meat which is also high in natural antioxidants.



The tasty quality of Mangalica pork owes much to their natural diet.

Consumers, who have tasted the Mangalica, have described its luscious fat as having a delightfully springy texture, dissolving on the tongue to leave a soft and creamy finish – just like Wagyu beef.

### LAST (LARD) WORDS

In recent years, lard is enjoying a renaissance as chefs and homemakers realise that no other cooking medium has the qualities and flavour of lard. Being aware that lard contains no trans fat unlike margarine, vegetable shortenings and hydrogenated fats, and that it has less saturated fat and more unsaturated fat than an equal amount of butter, foodies and farmers are reinstating the good qualities of lard. Even scientists and nutritionists are re-examining the studies on lard. And all lards are not equal as evident in the Mangalica.