

A herd of bison is grazing in a lush green field. In the background, a river flows through a valley, and the sky is filled with soft, white clouds. The scene is framed by a dark red, stylized fence graphic on both sides.

# MENU TREND: HERITAGE MEATS

Steeped in history and flavor, heritage breeds are roaming to a menu near you.

By Amelia Levin





**Source a heritage breed.**

Turkey - Auburn, Buff, Black, Bourbon Red, Midget White, Narragansett, Royal Palm, Slate, Standard Bronze

Chicken - Brahma, Buckeye, Catalana, Cornish, Delaware, Dorking, Langshan, Orpington, Poulet Rouge, Plymouth Rock, Rhode Island Red, Sussex, Wyandotte

Beef – Akaushi, Belgian Blue, Black Angus, Belted Galloway, Highland, Piedmontese, Simmental

Pork – Berkshire, Choctaw, Duroc, Guinea Hog, Hereford, Large Black, Gloucester Old Spot, Ossabaw, Red Wattle, Tamworth, Yorkshire

Rabbit – American, Belgian Hare, Beveren, Blanc de Hotot, Chinchilla, Crème d’Argent, Harlequin, Lilac, Rhinelander, Silver Fox

**above:** Free-roaming livestock experience less stress, which impacts flavor in a positive way.  
**opposite:** Duroc pork, known for its red coat, is an American breed pig developed around 1800 for its hardiness and quick muscle growth.

**B**efore agriculture became industrialized, farmers bred livestock to develop generational traits that over time adapted to the environment. With the rise of industrialized agriculture, these heritage breed livestock nearly became extinct in favor of commodity breeds known for continuous milk or egg production, rapid growth and other high-production characteristics.

“Most of the changes in animal husbandry and breeding began post-World War II when we had to feed more people quicker,” says Tom Ryan, vice president of marketing for Sierra Meat, a distributor of **Durham Ranch** heritage meats.

“Breeders looked to create a higher yield to stand up to industrial production, but over time has led to bland flavor, practices that are harsh on

the environment and on the animals themselves.” He says that raising animals in a high stress, crowded environment has negative effects on the quality of the meat. “It’s like taking a Ferrari and driving it like a pickup truck.”

**BRED TO SURVIVE**

According to **The Livestock Conservancy**, which works to protect livestock and poultry from extinction, the heritage breeds raised by our ancestors retained such essential attributes as increased longevity, foraging ability and increased resistance to disease and parasites. As a result of this regional breeding, heritage meat develops terroir, which chefs prefer for a unique, rich flavor versus the homogenous, muted taste of commodity meat.

While some heritage breeds have a long lineage, others are crossbred to retain certain characteristics that develop with the environment. The best heritage breed farmers have traceability of origin. Heritage is also indicative of how the animal was raised, which typically means without hormones, daily antibiotics and with enough room to roam free to exhibit their natural behaviors.

Joel Salatin, owner of **Polyface Farms**, Swoope, Virginia, was an early pioneer in the movement to provide alternatives to industrialized meat. “We are not disciples of heirloom breeds necessarily; we’re developing customized breeds that work well for us

here in our part of Virginia, where we have hot and cold seasons, 31 inches of rainfall, 2,000 feet elevation and frost dates before May 15 and after September 15.”

Salatin practices what he describes as functional breeding. He hand selects breeds that are adaptable to his region, and then continues to breed the healthiest animals above all other characteristics to continue the lineage. “Some prefer to breed for certain color or yield, but we believe health is the most important characteristic,” he says. “If you breed for health, you don’t need daily antibiotics or other crutches that cover up inherent weaknesses.”

Breeding for health also boosts the nutritional profile of his meat, Salatin says. Chefs prefer heritage meats for taste and sustainability, but also because they can charge a premium for it. But even beyond taste, Salatin believes it’s important to source heritage meat because it’s better for the environment.

Polyface Farms’ *pigaerator pork* is cultivated to have a good fatback to withstand colder, outdoor temperatures. “In our opinion,” says Salatin, “heritage meat is all about letting the animal express its behavior.” The farm doesn’t ring the pigs’ noses so they can dig, which helps to aerate the farm’s compost piles.

Salatin says his beef tastes different because the fat is concentrated in heart-healthy omega-3 fatty acids with a full-bodied flavor and little need for



extra salt or condiments. His pork is rose in color, with less fatty gristle. He believes his eggs taste richer and his chickens taste juicier because they actually run around and get fresh air, exercise and sunshine.

### TASTEFULLY DIFFERENT

Chefs should take note to cook heritage meat differently than commodity meat, says John Fleer, owner/executive chef, **Rhubarb**, Asheville, North Carolina.

“There are individual characteristics across breeds, so you have to take that into account,” he says.

Chefs have introduced consumers to heritage breeds of pork like Berkshire, known for its higher fat content that withstands cold temperatures outdoors and high temperatures on the grill. Fleer prefers **Ossabaw** pork for its rich marbling and soft fat that elicits an emulsified mouth feel. He orders whole hogs from a local farm that he fabricates in-house for different uses, including

### heritage goat

Goats were among the first animals to be domesticated, and their hardiness makes them a part of subsistence agriculture almost everywhere, according to The Livestock Conservancy. The history of goats in North America began with the arrival of Spanish explorers and in the 1500s and continued with English settlers in the 1600s.

Goat production in the U.S. changed in the mid-1800s to 1900s, with the importation of several European goat breeds, including the Toggenburg, Saanen, French Alpine, and Nubian, which were rapidly crossbred or replaced, prized for their mohair, cashmere, milk and meat. Some modern breeds, such as Arapawa and San Clemente are considered “critical” status by The Livestock Conservancy, in terms of the threat of extinction.

Nowadays, most goats in the U.S. are used for milk or companionship, but some small farms like Mint Creek Farm in Illinois pasture raise goat for meat. Customers include shoppers at consumers at Chicago’s Green City Market, and as the restaurant name suggests, chefs like Stephanie Izard of *Girl and the Goat* and *Little Goat*. “We have tried just about everything with goat, but a burger is an easy way to enjoy the meat, pure and simple,” she says.



## Bison (American Buffalo)

Though bison is the more accurate, biological name, these grass-pastured animals are also known as the American Buffalo. The largest land mammal since the end of the Ice Age and native to North America, as many as 70 million head once roamed the continent before nearing extinction, according to Lindner Bison, a bison farm.

Thanks to farmers and conservation efforts, today there are over 500,000 buffalo in North America. As bison are grassfed and grass-finished, the meat has a rich, dark red color and little marbling giving it its leanness. As a result, bison meat is more nutritionally dense than beef—high in beta-carotene, omega-3 fatty acids and other essential nutrients. “Sear on high, then low and slow” to prevent chewiness, Lindner Bison suggests.

dry-cured sausage and saucisson sec for his charcuterie program. “Ossabaw also makes great lardons,” he adds, which is a small strip or cube of pork fat.

Fleer brines pork loin and pork belly in a sorghum mixture to add sweetness and complexity, which he serves alongside sea island red peas garnished with crispy pork skin and dusted with salt and vinegar powder. He rubs the loin with *pinchito*, a Spanish spice blend, and then sears the loin before slow-roasting it in a wood-fired oven to maintain tenderness.

At **PinPoint Restaurant** in Wilmington, North Carolina, Dean Neff, executive chef/owner, sources pasture-raised heritage Duroc pork. The taste of this breed changes based on the pigs’ foraging habits throughout the year. Neff makes rustic headcheese with pig’s head, including the tender and

rich jowls, neck meat and tongue that he cures and serves thinly sliced on a charcuterie board. In the summer, he brines pork chops overnight, lightly grills until medium rare and serves with a corn and lovage pudding, peach aigre-doux and Benton’s bacon lardons.

Neff says he prefers Freedom Ranger birds, which he sources from a nearby farm, because the meat is more muscular with a softer texture and juiciness than commodity chicken. Neff always brines his birds and he prefers heritage chicken livers for mousse because it imparts a flavor that is both fresh and rich.

Neff also debones whole birds, then brines and rolls the meat—breast, leg, skin and all—before poaching and frying. He serves the flavorful roulade sliced with a hakurei turnip, leek and turnip green gratin. He makes an accompanying jus by roasting the bones and infusing the rich stock with hot pepper vinegar.

## MIX UP THE MENU WITH RABBIT

Heritage rabbit has also grown in popularity among chefs, prized for its sweeter taste and juiciness, and in some cases is blended with pork fat. Salatin’s son Daniel essentially developed his own heritage breed when he was just eight years old by selecting healthy rabbits to develop the lineage. “These rabbits are bulletproof,” says Salatin. “They have completely adapted to our climate and our production, handling and feeding practices.”



Neff prefers a Mississippi heritage rabbit for its slightly sweet flavor and lean texture. To create rabbit rillettes, he slowly braises the rabbit with stock, wine, herbs and such aromatics as fennel, parsnips, leeks, celery root and carrots. He adds bacon at the end for a little smokiness. He then finishes this “Deviled Rabbit” with house-made buttermilk hot sauce made from local peppers. When making rabbit sausage, he adds pork fat to balance the leanness.

Fleer makes a rabbit roulade of sorts, stuffing the loin and saddles with wild mushrooms and a forcemeat made with the leg meat. He rolls the meat, quickly sears and then roasts it off at a lower

temperature to keep it juicy and allow the flavors to meld.

Ryan says that heritage meats are forming the other puzzle piece to a food revolution in this country. “We’re going to start getting closer to a food system that doesn’t fight with Mother Nature, but rather, works with it when farmers put the right breed of animal in the right environment at the right time, and work to be better stewards of the land and of their animals.” ■

Amelia Levin is an award-winning food industry writer, certified chef and cookbook author. Her work has appeared in a variety of restaurant industry trade magazines as well as in the *Chicago Tribune*, *Health* and *Cooking Light* magazines.

**above:** Freedom Ranger chickens are slower growing than commodity chickens, which results in fewer health problems and a better tasting bird.  
**opposite:** Lower in saturated fat and leaner than beef, bison is a red meat menu-alternative to beef.