



Southern Heritage Hogs: Red Wattle, Choctaw, Guinea and Ossabaw

Southern hogs are unique--and valuable--in many ways. Read about more of the southern hog breeds.

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Red Wattle Hogs

Red Wattle hogs are big, red hogs that typically weigh between 600 and 800 pounds at maturity, but individuals occasionally tip the scale at well over half a ton.

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Special thanks to Josh Wendland of Barnes, Kan. His Red Wattle hogs were photographed by Stever Werblow for this article.

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They come in a palette of reds ranging from washed-out reddish to nearly black hues, sometimes accented with black specks or patches. They're short-coupled hogs with clean, lean heads and jowls; slim noses; and slightly arched backs.

Connoisseurs describe Red Wattle meat as unusually flavorful and tender. Chef Kevin Gillespie serves Red Wattle pork at Spokane's prestigious Luna restaurant, as does chef Mario Batali at the posh Del Posto restaurant in New York City.

One trait that sets a Red Wattle hog apart from most of its peers is the fleshy, finger-length, sausage-like appendages attached to both sides of its neck, also called "tassels" or "wattles"; these wattles serve no known function, but they also occur in a few other breeds.

Red Wattle hogs are known for their easygoing dispositions and productivity (litters average 10 to 15 piglets), as well as for their hardiness, foraging ability and rapid growth. The Red Wattle is an unusually fine choice for small-scale, pasture-based, gourmet pork production.

Today's Red Wattles descend from red, wattled, feral hogs captured by H.C. Wengler in a wooded area of eastern Texas.

In the early 1970s, Wengler bred two of his red, wattled sows to a Duroc boar, then bred their wattled offspring back to the original sows, thus developing what he called the Wengler Red Waddle Hog.

Another breeder, Robert Prentice, located a sounder of red, wattled hogs in the woods of East Texas, which he captured and bred to Wengler Red Waddles to create Endrow Farm Wattle Hogs.

During the 1980s, Red Wattle hogs were so popular that three organizations registered these hogs and there were more than 100 known breeders.

However, by 1999, only 42 hogs kept by six breeders remained. The breed is slowly recovering, but additional conservators are sorely needed.

Guinea Hogs

Another breed in need of conservation is the Guinea hog, once commonplace throughout the South and now all-but-extinct.



Guinea Hogs: Courtesy Sullbar Farm, New Boston, NH

While its exact origin is unknown, some authorities believe Guinea hogs descend from bristly haired, sandy-red swine called Red Guineas that slave traders carried from West Africa and the Canary Islands to America.

Or, they may be descendants of small, hairy, black hogs kept on homesteads throughout the southeastern United States beginning in the early 1800s.

Regional names for these black, homestead hogs included Acorn Eater, Yard Pig, Pineywoods Guinea and Guinea Forest Hog. Some had long noses, others short; they were variously described as small-, medium- or large-framed; and they ranged in size from 100 to 300 pounds. Other traits these pigs had in common with today's Guinea hogs included the ability to fend for themselves and produce meat and lard with minimal human input; black or bluish-black, hairy coats; upright ears and curly tails.

There are fewer than 200 purebred Guinea hogs in the world today. These friendly little swine still excel at homestead chores such as tilling the garden and ridding the place of pests like snakes and rodents; they produce tasty cuts of traditional, somewhat fatty pork; and they make fine farm pets in the offspring.

Choctaw Hogs

Choctaw hogs descend from pigs brought to our shores by Spanish explorers and settlers; they evolved in the Deep South, but traveled to Oklahoma Territory in the early to mid-1800s with the Choctaw and neighboring Native American tribes. They've changed very little in 150 years.

Most Choctaw hogs weigh about 120 pounds; they're black with occasional white markings and their ears stand erect or droop slightly. Many have wattles and fused, "mulefoot" hooves; long legs; strongly developed forequarters; and agility rarely matched in the porcine tribe. Raised in the traditional root-or-die manner, they're swift, agile and wild. However, raised like standard hobby-farm hogs, Choctaws can be quite tame.

The present population numbers a few hundred animals, nearly all living in the southeast Oklahoma counties that once comprised the Choctaw Nation. No registry yet exists, but the ALBC monitors this breed.

Ossabaw Island Hogs

At 26,000 acres, Ossabaw Island is Georgia's third-largest barrier island. Located in the Atlantic, seven miles south of Savannah, it's accessible only by boat.

No one lives there now; its only inhabitants are an abundance of plants and wildlife, including its famous feral pigs.

Ossabaw Island hogs are direct descendants of swine Spanish explorers left on the uninhabited island 400 years ago. Successive generations adjusted to their harsh life by becoming smaller and adapting to an environment that provides little to eat. To adapt, the hogs developed a unique, fat-metabolism mechanism that enables them to store a larger proportion of fat than any other hog. Hogs on the island exist in black (with or without white spots), red and tan; they generally weigh less than 100 pounds. In captivity, Ossabaw Island hogs grow larger, but they're still small by commercial-hog standards. However, the flesh of Ossabaw Island hogs is a beautifully marbled dark red, with a rich, wild flavor that endears it to gourmet chefs. Chef Ignacio Mattos, for example, served delicious, slow-roasted Ossabaw Island pork at the 2007 Il Buco Pig Roast in New York City.

While feral hogs still roam Ossabaw Island, they're routinely and rigorously culled to protect native species and, unfortunately, it's unlawful to import them to the mainland due to quarantine restrictions. Roughly 200 animals descended from hogs imported during the 1970s comprise the entire mainland herd, making unique, pure-Spanish hogs a top conservation priority. Special thanks to Josh Wendland ...

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