

Controversy aside, pork a good pick

BY DANA CARPENDER
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It's hard to think of a more controversial meat than pork.

On the one hand, it's beloved by many cultures. Ever since the Chinese domesticated the wild boar over 5,000 years ago, pork has been the most popular meat in Chinese cooking, and pork agriculture has spread around the world.

The economics of pork argue strongly in its favor; just feed a pig your waste or let them forage in the woods, and you'll be able to use "everything but the squeal."

The Irish dubbed the pig "the gentleman who pays the rent," and many pioneer families counted on a pig not only for protein, but also for lard to use (as we'd use oil, butter, or — heaven forbid — hydrogenated shortening today).

It is common knowledge that pork is taboo in Judaism and Islam, considered unclean, perhaps because of the age-old problem of trichinellosis (also called trichinosis) from undercooked meat.

Even those who eat and enjoy pork often see it as a guilty pleasure, less healthy than, say, chicken or fish. Whenever someone criticizes our low-carb way of eating, bacon and pork rinds are brought up as the ultimate evidence that we must be nuts to think this is a healthy diet.

Just how healthy — or unhealthy — is pork, really?

First of all, the Centers for Disease Control say that from being "very common" in years past, trichinellosis has now become "relatively rare," with about 12 cases per year reported.

No one is suggesting pork tartare, but if you cook your pork until the juices run clear, you're fine. (By the way, they also say that trichinellosis is now mainly associated with eating undercooked wild game — hunters, take note.)

Pork has a lot going for it nutritionally. It's a great source of B vitamins; 6 ounces of cooked pork will give you 112 percent of your daily requirement for thiamin, 31 percent of your riboflavin, 47 percent of your niacin, 44 percent of your B6, and 20 percent of your B12 — that's a lot of vitamins! You'll also get 26 percent of your zinc, and more than 100 percent of the selenium you need.

Most surprising, pork is a fine source of potassium, usually associated with plant foods. That same 6 ounces of cooked pork has 694 mg of potassium — considerably more than a banana!

But isn't pork terribly fatty? And isn't pork fat — lard — just about the worst possible fat?

Pork is considerably leaner than it was a generation or two ago. The great low-fat diet craze inspired pork producers to raise leaner, meaner hogs, to the point where the leanest cuts can be a bit dry and bland unless they're carefully seasoned and moist-cooked.

How fatty pork is depends very much on the cut. Boneless pork loin is very lean, almost as lean as skinless chicken breast. Six ounces of roasted boneless pork top loin has just 330 calories — and no carbs, of course.

You'll get 51 grams of pro-

tein. But 6 ounces of braised pork spareribs will give you 675 calories — again, with no carbs — and 49 grams of protein. The difference, of course, is the fat content.

How bad is that fat? Nowhere near as bad as you've been led to believe. About 45 percent of pork fat is made up of monounsaturates, the same sort of fat you'll find in olive oil or nuts.

Monounsaturates raise good cholesterol but not bad cholesterol, making them positively good for your health. Eighteen percent of fat is polyunsaturated, leaving 37 percent of pork fat that is saturated. There are no trans fats, however.

A strong argument can be made that the lard our ancestors used for shortening was far healthier than the hydrogenated shortening that supplanted it over the past 50 years.

Dana Carpenders is the author of "500 Low-Carb Recipes" and the editor of the bi-weekly online newsletter "Lowcarbazine!" You can contact her online at www.holdthetoast.com.