



Eric Mortenson/Capital Press

Zack Agopian, who operates Corfini Gourmet's meat and seafood distribution office in Portland, struck a deal to sell a Washington producer's minimally processed hogs to chefs at university and corporate cafes.

Giving value to going 'whole hog'

By ERIC MORTENSON
Capital Press

PORTLAND — Zachary Agopian posed it as a question, a challenge to the institutional chefs who demand top-flight meat and seafood, and to the Washington state hog farmer whose operation is described as setting the "gold standard" for humane treatment.

"How do we get the price down on really high-end pork that's sustainably grown?" Agopian asked his collaborators.

The retail market wants pork in neat, vacuum-packed, sealed packages with the fat trimmed and the bone removed. But chefs at Bon Appetit, which operates university and corporate cafes, didn't necessarily need it that way.

So Agopian, who manages a Portland distribution office for Corfini Gourmet, forged an agreement in which Bon Appetit buys minimally processed whole hogs, delivered in cardboard boxes. Buying the whole animal instead of selected cuts drives the price down and greatly simplifies life for Pure Country Pork, of Ephrata, Wash., which

doesn't have to cut, package, store and find buyers for the less-desirable parts.

Observers describe the arrangement as a significant tweak of the food system. They say buyers need to walk the talk if they truly want to support local meat producers who treat their animals humanely, don't confine hogs in gestation crates and don't use antibiotics.

A Bon Appetit buyer said the program is working because Agopian is completely transparent in his dealings. Buyers get a breakdown of carcass weights, Agopian's markup and other information.

Agopian, a former chef himself, believes the model can be applied to other protein markets. He said chefs have taken up the challenge of finding menu uses for the whole hog.

Chefs also prefer the high-quality meat they're buying, he said.

"You braise it down to make carnitas — which one tastes better?" he asked. "The one with fat and bone, every time. It's a no-brainer."

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