

# Niche Pork Production Part 1

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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## SPEAKERS

Christa Hartsook, Dave Stender

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**C** Christa Hartsook 00:00

Hello, and welcome to the small farms podcast, a production of the small farms program at Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. Our podcast covers the opportunities and challenges associated with rural life. In this episode, I'm interviewing Dave Stender swine fields, specialists for Iowa State University Extension and outreach. And we're talking about some niche pork production opportunities. I'm Christa Hartsook, small farms program coordinator. And we hope you enjoy the show. Dave, welcome to the show. Thanks for being on today.

**D** Dave Stender 00:33

Yeah, thanks, Christa.


**C** Christa Hartsook 00:34

All right, let's start out by defining what we mean by niche pork production. What do we mean when we say that?

**D** Dave Stender 00:42

Well, from an acreage owner point of view, and niche pork production would be something small and something usually what happens is that they that you have have a few pigs, and you're trying to find friends and neighbors or market or people through the market, if you're going to a farmers market that would be wanting to buy some pork, and that's raised in a unique, some kind of a unique way. There's also what I would call larger scale, more wholesale niche production, which which would be more animals and where you get more of a, of a wholesale market, and then you deliver to packing plant directly. And so there's really two two branches to niche, the way I look at it, and, and probably what we're talking about for acreage owners, most acreage owners wouldn't have a lot of facilities. And so if you get if you're limited


on facilities that then you're talking about small number of pigs and, and trying to get a premium price for some pork products would be the name of the game for or what I would I would define as niche production.

 Christa Hartsook 02:00

Okay, Dave, are there still viable opportunities out there for producers? Let's say maybe I am interested in that direct to consumer market, you know, is there a continued interest in buying meat from a producer that you know, and have a relationship with

 02:18

the marketing is is the hard part about that. And in in Iowa, there's, you know, plant plentiful number of pork, pork producers and pork. And so, you know, historically that a lot of people in Iowa know how to how to purchase a pig through the local locker but, you know, historically that's been more of the lame pigs or they have a little little hernia or something that's that they don't want to take them into a truck and and haul them to commodity market, that's probably what I'd call the lower lower value with with niche, it's a different you got to find a different customer, somebody that wanting to have a different eating experience. And so as you're as you're producing a niche pig, you want it to taste to taste better and, and to give the consumer a story with it. And so therefore, you need to with just a small number of pigs, believe me pigs are work and for just a small number of pigs, you want to have a margin and a pretty big margin in order to do direct, direct niche production on an acreage.

 Christa Hartsook 03:39

Okay. Dave While, I'm thinking of it are there specific breeds that seem to work better in this style of production

 03:50

there are there are breeds the pork board's done some some quality testing and there are some breeds that that traditionally marble better and have maybe a different tasting tasting pork and so that you know of the major breeds the best breed quality these is Berkshire, Berkshire Duroc and and Chester white in in that order, probably, but within breed, there's lots of variation and so it's not, it's not impossible to to have other breeds and feed them so that they marble better. So there's some there's some work in the late 90s where, where if you feed a higher carb diet, you can get the pigs to marble better and and have a better eating experience. So there's options there you don't you're not locked into having to do a heritage breed, you know, mangalitsa or or those kinds of things. You don't have to do that, but if you're if you're wanting a premium, that's a talking point, and of course the pork will be more intramuscular fat and have a different taste and flavor probably then, then then you would if you're raising 1000 pigs in, in, an environmentally controlled facility.

 Christa Hartsook 05:24

Christa Hartsook 05:12

Absolutely. Dave, no matter if we're talking about, you know, marketing direct to consumer, or we're talking maybe about some of these specialty contract opportunities that might be out there on a little bit larger acreage or small farm, how does our management differ in what we are doing versus what I would call conventional pork production in Iowa?



05:49

Well, a lot of times, you're you're trying to trying to keep the pigs healthier. And so it's, it's absolutely critical that, that you keep diseases out of your out of your farm, and that it just won't, it just doesn't work very well. If you end up with some with some diseases, that, that you really absolutely have to treat with antibiotics, just just, it's just best if if you can get your animals in very healthy, if you're buying feeder pigs, make sure that they're vaccinated, you know, you talked to I'm not a veterinarian, so but the veterinarians will give you all the common diseases, you want to talk to a good swine veterinarian about, about immunity before you bring them in. And then footwear, we're doing some biosecurity workshops. And so you might want to go on the web and see if you can find and go to a biosecurity workshop because that may be another our topic lately, that we probably need to watch your footwear, the bottom line of it is that you don't want to walk anywhere where street shoes have walked. And so your chore shoes need to be on the back porch or out the back door. Or in a shed, you know, even putting up a shed with a bench in the middle of that shed so that you can, you can have designated walkway that doesn't get walked on a drive not driven on by any other any other vehicle. And that can be a challenge because there's all kinds of systems management systems that you have to have in place. I mean, what are you going to do with a dead animal you're going to call the rendering truck are you gonna learn how to compost, how you can get feed in. Iowa is one of the one of the best places in the nation for starting niche pigs because still some small feed mills around that might might be able to get you some bulk feed and like it a ton of the time, you know, most of the time, it's 28 tons in a in a semi load but, but there are still some smaller feed mills here and there across the state that I would look into, as far as management very difficult to make money with niche pig, if you're spending way too much on your input costs can't get enough on the output costs. So you have to, you really have to have lower cost inputs, in order to make it work. Sometimes there's vegetables or things on on a vegetable farm that or apples, you know, leftover apples and, and things like that. Pigs don't grow real fast on on vegetables, they're more they're more carbon protein driven animals. But you know, you want to think about cheap feed stuffs kind of ways of getting the pig fed and up to market is up so you're not gonna be your number one cost is is how you're gonna get enough energy and protein into that pig to get it up to market weight.



Christa Hartsook 09:09


Dave, we're going into obviously some challenging, colder winter months in Iowa, what do we need to be thinking of in terms of, you know, facilities, good management practices for raising those animals?



09:25

Yeah, and most of the time, we're talking about outdoor access and it gets very cold in Iowa. So you need to have the pigs need to have a place that's inside that is protected from the weather

that they can they can kind of crawl into and we depend on the pig size needs to be like a Hoover design where the false roof so that the heat stays with the animals. But you can't let it be stale in there completely. You don't want drafts. It's really it's really kind of tricky with outside pigs because you don't want drafts because then they'll then they're, they're gonna be hard to manage with their dunging habits. You have to manage that but but the goal would be to have a nice dry bedding for them to lay on. And so you you manage your dunging habits, but but also they need dry, clean fresh air to breathe. And so if you shut your building up too much, it's it's the the pig breathes out moisture and the moisture will condense on walls if the walls are cold so you know, insulation is part of it to make sure that there's no condensation going on, but the moisture given off by pig needs to be ventilated. And that can be natural I mean with the sloped roof or what the old, old time farmers called 12 by 20s and that's just a 12 foot by 20 foot shed that's on sleds but the roof is got a pitch so that the hot air rises and you have to have a place for the hot air to rise the hot moist air to rise and exit the building at just the right amount so that you keep the air cool and dry the health of these pigs is way better than warm and wet.

 Christa Hartsook 11:23

Absolutely deep How about water so you know I know pigs aren't don't require as much water as say a cattle operation but still need to have you know thawed waters and everything maintained there during the winter months.

 11:37

Yeah, watering the huge issue and I will for outside especially for outside pigs there are a lots and lots of used waters across the state if you do put in a water line you're gonna probably have hot water most most of the time the easiest way is to make sure there's electricity running in with the water line so the come up with electricity and and then a local farm store still sell heating elements and those kinds of things for water, there is a frost free option. But those need a certain amount be careful on those because they need to, the 50 degree well water is what's used to heat the water and so you need the minimum number of pigs drinking off that water I'd say at least 20per whole drinking out of that water to keep it open in the wintertime. And so the frost freeze when they don't they freeze you have a big problem.


 Christa Hartsook 12:34

Okay, are there certain types of bedding material that are better than other types in this type of system, Dave?

 12:41

Well, in my mind, yes, you you train you try to train the animals for are going going out in the dunging patterns in places where you want them to dung and then you try to keep the bedding dry and if you keep the bedding dry, then wood chips or corn stalks are bean stubble, I mean they'll eat they'll eat a lot of that straw of course is the most absorbent. So if you can't keep them dry, you know straw would be your number one bedding source but if you can keep them

dry, you can probably use any any kind of material that's reasonably priced, the pigs will chew on it and make good bedding out of corn stalks or, or wood chips or whatever whatever you would want to use in there. Even hay gets wet really fast if if they if they don't do the dung habits and so a niche pork producer you're talking about bedding you're gonna want to talk about learning learning how a pig thinks and how to train a pig for correct Dunging habits and and you know just a couple there's lots of things you can do but but in general, they will dung in the most uncomfortable place in the pen or in the building or in the yard. And so a draft or it's too cold or if it's too hot, that's where they'll end up, end up dunging and open fence promotes dunging especially if there's pigs on the other side if they can see another pig open fences promote dunging. Solid fences help you in training the pigs and to not be not done. So if you want an area where they're sleeping on solid fence in the summertime you can run into a problem because it'll be too hot and you need to get some air flow to that area so it changes the really the hardest time is when in the spring in the fall when temperatures go from hot to cold. And then and then that's the most difficult time to train a pig. One of the one of the producers years ago I came into a barn it was that was nice and dry with good bedding and I go well what's your secret to keep the pigs to keep the pigs dry, and before the sun rises in the morning, he runs, he runs them outside. And so at least once a day they're trained to go, their dunging habits are split trained to go outside rather than in the bedding.

 Christa Hartsook 15:16

Dave, we talked a little bit about some biosecurity concerns and some issues, you know, just because there are so many diseases and things associated with pork production, you know, talk to me a little bit more about some specific measures that we could put in place in any size of system that we might be thinking of.

 15:37

Yeah, and, and over the years, I'm not so much worried about blowing in as much as I used to be, it's still a possibility and insects and rodent control are important and all those things are important. But But the number one, especially for small farms, the number one thing is what's on your feet and what's on your hand, probably the most dangerous place that to pick up germs is where everybody else brings pigs and so that would be at the harvest plant and and so you need to be doubly careful they have they have plastic boots for sale at most farm supply stores, I would wear at least two pairs if I was going to sell when I'm selling pigs, and I would never walk into the trailer or my pickup with with boots that have touched any kind of ground anywhere near harvest facility. And so I would be shedding those plastic boots as I get into the pickup I would I would have hand sanitizer I'd be washing my hands I'd be wearing gloves, those kinds of things at those places because that's where the germs will be the in the second thing on on. For small niche herds, we've already talked about is set up a separate path to go to the, to do chores with the hogs, and you don't cross that path with your chore shoes with any other vehicle or, or foot traffic. I would change boots twice as I do that if I was worried that'd be the. The number one thing I would do is change change shoes before I went from town from my town shoes or any traffic around the house. And I would make sure that my shoes were different shoes when I did chores.

 Christa Hartsook 17:36

Okay, join us for part two of our niche pork production Podcast coming up