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Gourmet

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Redesigning the Pig

A barbecue pitmaster has a vision both crazy and pure BY JOHN T. EDGE

HE'S A STOREFRONT REVIVALIST, working the pews. His eyes are bright, keen, piercing, as if backlit by the fervor of conviction. His brow is beaded; his shirt-front is damp. His voice rises, a crescendo of persuasion, a clarion for the cause. With the crescendo come the nods of the converted, at first hesitant, then quick. With the nods come shouts of affirmation and exultation.

Move the action from a church to a pigsty, out on the coastal plain beyond Raleigh, in Pender County, North Carolina. And then conjure Ed Mitchell, a 59-year-old barbecue pitmaster, who, before heeding the call, was cooking in a cinder-block emporium on the outskirts of nearby Wilson. Dressed in blue overalls, Mitchell paces the muck on a January day, testifying to third-generation hog farmers Mary and Nelson James. His Old Testament gravitas is leavened by a modicum of Jesse Jackson populism. "I'm here," Mitchell announces, sweeping his arms wide. "I was sent. There's a reason!"

"I've been farming since I was a weed hopper," Nelson James confesses. "But, to tell you the truth, I was thinking on getting out. I just knew the big man was going to come in and swoop this up. That was my nightmare."

Mitchell drapes his arm across the wiry man's back and shows the man's wife a toothy grin. Although this is the first time Mitchell and the Jameses have met, they are brothers and sisters in bond. The transformation is instantaneous—and puzzling, for Mitchell has yet to explain to them how, by contracting with farmers to rear hogs for a nascent chain of barbecue restaurants, he hopes to rescue the small North Carolina farmer from the brink of extinction. He has not sketched his idea of returning great pork—the round-flavored pork he knew as a child, before the industry embraced confinement pens and waste lagoons and lean-generation genetics—to working-class eaters. He wants to build a hog—his own hog—from the hoof up. >



BRIAN DOBEN

But Mary James is already in his thrall. She looks into his face and sees promise. Apropos of nothing but Ed Mitchell's quick and forceful words, his presence, she shouts "Hallelujah!" Nelson James ducks his head low and then cranes up toward Mitchell. "I tell you what," he says. "Your talking makes me feel like going out back and doing a little farming."

Mary and Nelson James have known hope before. Back in 2002, they signed on to raise hogs for the evolving niche market pioneered very successfully by Niman Ranch out in the Midwest. Niman wanted hogs with more intramuscular fat, which results in pork with more flavor. The idea was that by raising animals that met such standards, small local farmers might stanch the loss of ancestral lands.

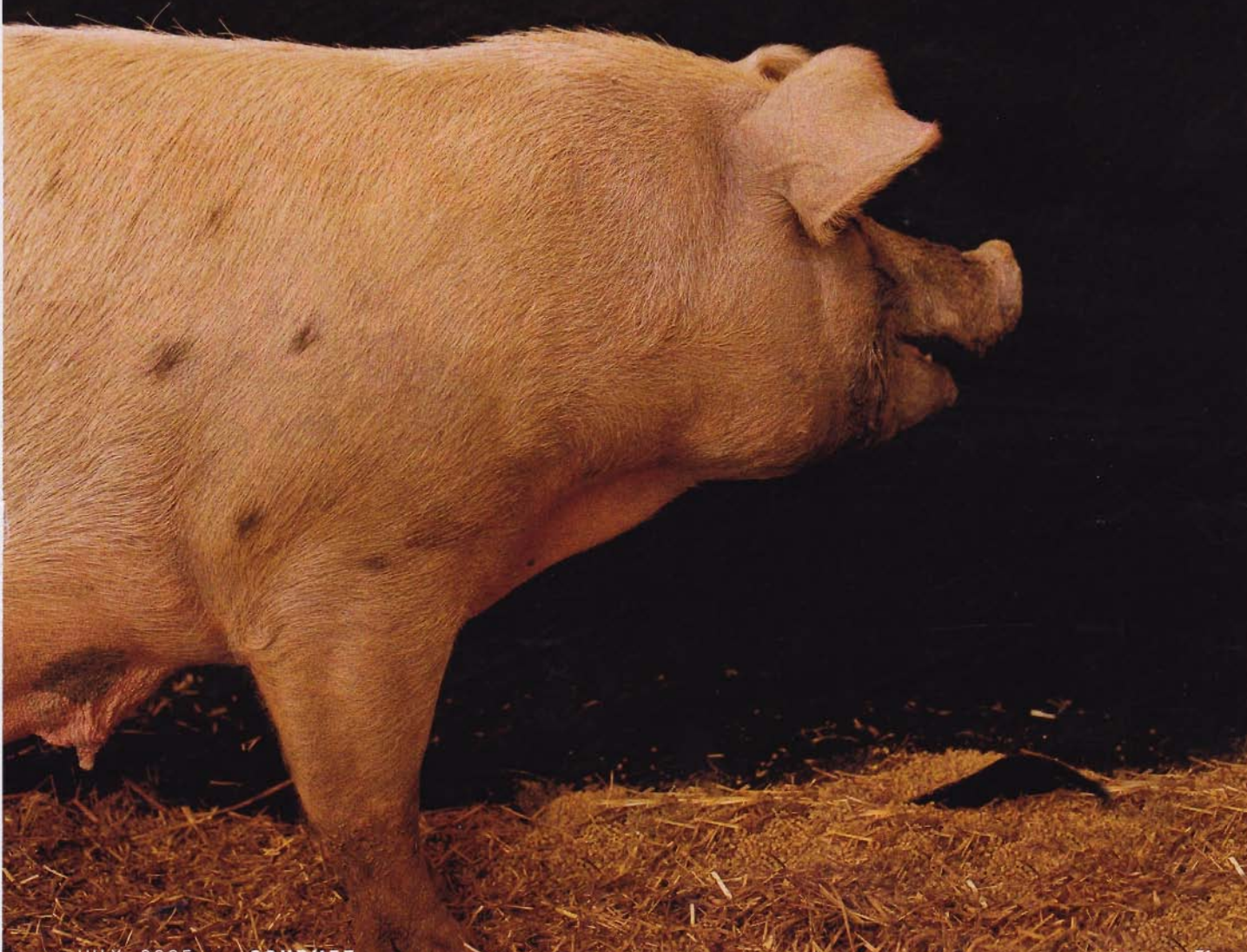
But tensions arose. Some farmers in the program complained that, although Niman Ranch paid a premium for better hogs, for antibiotic- and growth-hormone-free hogs, the differential was not enough. Others chafed under a marketing plan that effectively ignored North Carolina provenance in favor of the overarching Niman brand. And some black farmers—like the James family—wondered aloud whether a white-controlled company based on the West Coast could possibly have their best interests at heart.

Into this fray stepped Mitchell. He did not purposely exploit Niman Ranch's weaknesses. He did not talk of race or kindle the flames of provincial pride. But he took stock of his

own talents. And he learned how to leverage them. Among Mitchell's gifts is an instinctual ability to garner good press. Even while he has struggled—and, to a certain degree, failed—to compete with Wilson barbecue stalwarts like Parker's and Bill's, Mitchell and his eponymous restaurant have, in the past couple of years, snagged a page one story in *The New York Times* and a recurring headliner gig at Manhattan's Big Apple Barbecue Block Party. For outlanders in search of authentic North Carolina barbecue, Mitchell has become the go-to guy.

Many of his acolytes might be surprised to learn that Mitchell came late to barbecue. In a business dominated by third- and fourth-generation restaurateurs, he is an accidental pitmaster. After earning degrees in sociology and public administration, Mitchell signed on with Ford Motor Company and moved north. But when his father fell ill, his mother called him home. Shortly after his father died, in 1990, Mitchell began cooking whole hogs for his mother to sell by the sandwich at the family store.

Like any good barbecue man, he honed a repertoire of techniques. He learned to bank his pits, to stack them with charcoal and hickory so that the temperature held steady through the night. Following his mother's lead, he began soaking his wood in a salt- and pepper-spiked vinegar solution that, when ignited, perfumed the pork with more than mere wood smoke. >



Although he was new to the business, he was not new to the whole-hog style found in the eastern reaches of North Carolina. "Used to be that you cooked a pig when you brought the tobacco crop in," Mitchell recalls. "And I would stay up late with the old men when they cooked. I was too young for the 'shine they passed around, so, as the evening grew long, I took on more of the responsibility. Sometime in the middle of the night, they usually fell out. It was my pig from then on."

ED MITCHELL'S BELIEF in the supremacy of pork of the sort raised by the James family and marketed by Niman Ranch is of more recent vintage. In fact, he never thought about the inferiority of factory-farmed pork until, in the spring of 2003, he cooked a hog that had been bred to be succulent instead of lean, a hog that had spent much of its life in a pasture, eating sweet-potato culls and field corn.

"That pork knocked me down," Mitchell recalls. "It tasted like the barbecue I remember from the tobacco days: juicy and full of flavor. I knew that was the pork my grandfather ate all his life. I knew that was the old-fashioned pork we lost when near about everybody went industrial."

Like many a craftsman at the top of his game, Mitchell had come to believe that he owed his success to technique, to an accumulation of knowledge stored in his head and executed by his hands. That first taste of pastured pork led him to ponder the possibilities: How much better could my barbecue be if I cooked these hogs every day? If I cooked these hogs every day, would my customers appreciate the difference? And, if they did, would they be willing to pay the price?

Mitchell didn't have the resources to put that pork on his menu. He needed a network of farmers to guarantee a steady supply. He needed a partner who could prove to a skeptical public that what his palate told him was true. North Carolina

A&T State University, in Greensboro, the historically black college that birthed the sit-in movement, was willing. And in January of this year, Mitchell signed a development and marketing deal with their School of Agriculture.

"The idea is that A&T provides the science," says Mitchell. "They work on what breeds are best for barbecue, which ones give us the right amount of fat. We brand that as Pitmaster pork. And we work together on what feed results in the best-tasting pork. Based on those factors, we choose a pig and a feed and a protocol for raising it. But science only gets you so far. My palate tells me when we get it right."

The potential for the partnership is great. The appeal is as much moral as it is sensory, and the consumers of North Carolina may well prove to be the ideal targets. Aware of the massive waste-lagoon spills of the '90s—the ones that gushed from factory hog farms, befouling rivers and threatening the water supply—and attuned to the plight of small farmers who refuse to succumb to the false allure of large-scale contract farming, they constitute an informed class of eater.

Ed Mitchell has grand plans: He envisions a chain of Pitmaster Barbecue Markets. His crew will mentor a new generation of pitmasters, men and women with pockets deep enough to buy into Mitchell's franchise system. In addition to the takeaway markets, Mitchell also envisions a collection of Pitmaster Barbecue Restaurant and Lounges—each with a point-and-scarf pig-picking bar as its focus.

In the meantime, Mitchell is recruiting farmers. He begins with four, none of whom keep their animals in confinement pens. All have pledged to ban growth hormones and antibiotics. And all will feed their Berkshires and Durocs and various crossbreeds a natural diet of locally raised crops such as barley, sweet potatoes, and peanuts. But that's about as specific as Mitchell will get; the Pitmaster brand of pork he plans to develop with A&T remains, for now, a dream.

Read between the lines and you'll realize that the odds are against Ed Mitchell. On paper, his resources are meager. As this magazine goes to press, he's battling both a loan foreclosure and accusations of tax evasion (Mitchell says that he is innocent) while exploring expansion plans with venture capitalists. And he's been known to flirt with the idea of cooking confinement-raised hogs again, a scenario that a large-scale farmer from Wilson briefly convinced him was the sure path to economic stability.

But it would be foolhardy to count Mitchell out, for he travels the state like a circuit rider, forging coalitions, recruiting investors, and winning converts. As he comes to terms with the ills of the reigning system of hog farming, his righteous indignation builds. This past winter, Mitchell visited his first confinement facility. He exited with tears in his eyes, though it was unclear to his companions whether he was crying from the high stench of hog urine or the realization that, by dint of his chosen career, he bore the burden of change.

Almost anyone can study the hog industry and cite a gruesome litany of statistics. And many are the chefs who, for reasons both savory and smug, feature pastured pork on their \$25-an-entrée menus. But Ed Mitchell's vision is both subversive and sublime: His model is one in which access to the kind of pork his grandfather knew is not restricted to white-tablecloth consumers. Ed Mitchell imagines a day when Mary and Nelson James will take seats at his table, order three-buck sandwiches, and savor what they, brothers and sisters in bond, have wrought. ☺

A portrait in possibilities: Ed Mitchell delivers a message of hope.

