The Pinnacle of Pork

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pare and simply gorge.

At one end of the festival, at the booth of Antica Salumeria Granieri Amato, founded in 1916, three generations of the Granieri family were handing children crunchy hunks of deeply bronzed skin. Their salumeria produces a strictly traditional porchetta, and is one of the last to still roast porchetta in a wood oven, for smoky flavor.

At the other end, the hip young chef Marco Gubbiotti of Cucinaa, a "gastronomic project" in nearby Foligno, handed out porchetta sandwiches stuffed with a confit of apple and fennel.

Some producers use fistfuls of garlic, others just pinches; some leave the liver in for the rich flavor it adds to the stuffing, others consider that bizarre; some perfume the meat with rosemary, while others maintain that only fennel pollen has the true flavor of Umbria.

The professional chefs used a large piece of pork that American butchers call the "perfect cut" instead of the whole pig. "They take the whole pork belly, which is super fatty, and wrap it around the loin, which is relatively lean," said Matt Lindemulder, a partner at Porchetta in the East Village, where they use the same cut. "When they cook together, the fat from the belly bastes the loin."

Respect for food traditions was already entrenched in Italian culture when the modern values of eating locally, sustainably and transparently went global — partly via Slow Food, which was founded just a few hundred kilometers away. At Porchettiamo, the Umbrian reverence for pork, and passion for the deep culinary and agricultural heritage of the region, were on full display.

Valentino Gerbi, a founder and butcher at a new meat producer called Etrusco, handed out juicy meatballs and fliers advertising the company's "carne locale radicale," radical local meat.

Etrusco allows its animals — both cows and pigs — to grow larger than modern tastes have dictated. Today's younger, smaller animals are more tender, but they are less flavorful, and less like the meat our great-grandparents ate.

"We embrace the peasant traditions of central Italy — no compromises, no shortcuts," Mr. Gerbi said.

Many other farmers here are developing sidelines in organic and heirloom produce, or converting family farms from commercial to traditional production.

"Like the old times, our pigs are grazing outdoors, eating corn and barley instead of bone meal, taking no supplements or antibiotics," said Ramon Rustici, a farmer who supplied several of the pigs for Porchettiamo. "People today want to know that they are eating cibo vero," real food.

It doesn't get much more real than the back room of Carlo Giuliani's butcher shop in Costano just after dawn, when the smell of bleach is still stronger than the smell of blood. The day after Porchettiamo, Mr. Giuliani was preparing to make porchetta from a 220-pound pig that had been raised at the Rustici farm in the hills above Assisi, slaughtered and cleaned, then aged for three days to dry out the skin. (This makes it crisp up when roasted.)

Like many European farmers, the Rusticis raise Large Whites, a fast-growing, hardy breed of British origin; the Italian strain is bred with particularly large and muscular legs, the better for making prosciutto.

Mr. Giuliani had no special tools, just a knowledge of porcine anatomy and a knife with a wickedly thin, long blade that he sharpened every 10 minutes or so. (When knives are used to cut against bone, they dull very quickly.)

An hour later, he had removed more than 200 bones from the carcass; set aside the trotters and ears to simmer in a dish called cicotto that is made from the leftover bits of pig; and methodically rubbed the inside with minced shallots, garlic, salt, pepper and a thick golden dusting of fennel pollen.

"The fennel is what makes it Umbrian," said Barbara D'Agapiti, owner of Wine Link Italy, a guide to local food and wine. Fennel grows wild here, and its pollen has the refreshing whiff of dried sage, with notes of saffron, lemon and fennel seed.

To foreigners, Umbria and its food are often overshadowed by the high profile of Tuscany, which lies just to the west. But in Italy, Umbria is fondly called "il cuore verde d'Italia," the green heart of Italy, for its fertile soil and ancient agricultural traditions. Pork from its green hills and deep forests has been prized since pre-Roman times.

Today, if you spend time poking around Umbria's pig farms, prosciutto makers and pork festivals, you will be regaled by theories about how the region came to be the epicenter of pork butchery in Italy.

Among them: In Preci, Benedictine monks flourished as healers from the 13th century, building a rare library of anatomy texts and a renowned infirmary. They taught their skills to locals who were already skilled in "surgery" — butchers. Watching Mr. Giuliani remove the pig's 32 ribs one by one lent credence to this theory.

For those without surgical-level knife skills, Umbrian-style porchetta is still an accessible pleasure, within reach of any home cook with a large grill (though a roasting pan in an oven will do). Fennel pollen is easy to order and well worth trying, even if you believe that rosemary and garlic with pork is the most celestial combination imaginable. (In California, where wild fennel does grow, cooks can easily harvest their own.)

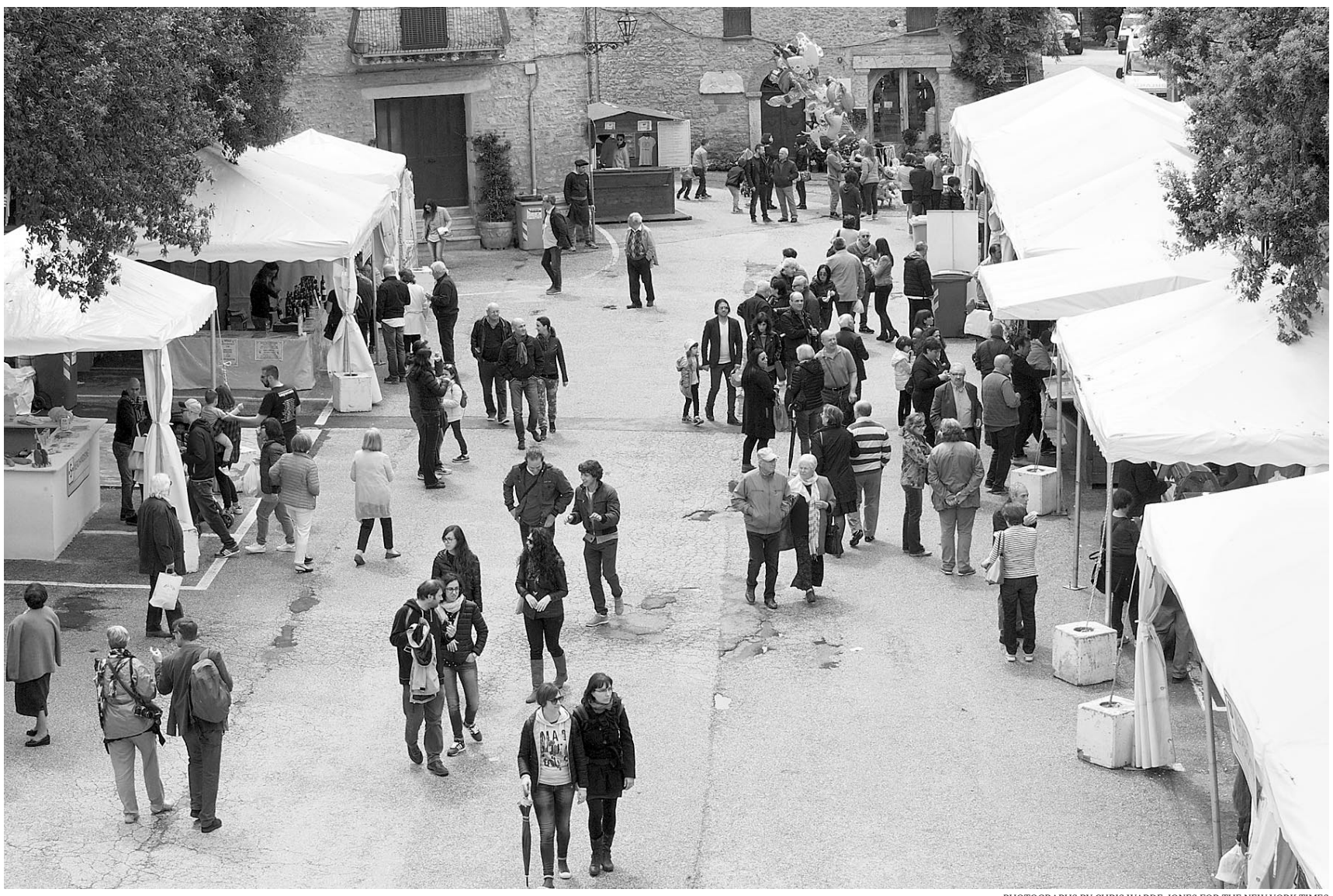
A whole pig is not practical unless you are feeding a whole town, but any boneless well-marbled roast with skin or a thick fat cap will do.

The key elements of the finished dish are juicy meat, soft fat and crispy crust. In modern Umbrian kitchens, porchetta has expanded beyond pork, so that "in porchetta" has simply come to mean boneless meat, rolled round garlic and herbs, and roasted.

It is served at hip Umbrian restaurants in variations like carp in porchetta, beef in porchetta, and — in the case of the young chef Nicolas Bonifacio of Eat Out Osteria Gourmet in Assisi — rabbit in porchetta with hummus, garlic yogurt and Middle Eastern spices.

Porchetta, the festival organizers say, deserved to be honored as food of the people, unlike luxury ingredients such as truffles, prosciutto and Parmigiano-Reggiano that typically command respect and attention from the greater food world.

"Street food is the food of the future," said Antonio Boco, a co-founder of Porchettiamo. "Low-cost food, without boundaries, that makes many people happy: What could be more global than that?"



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Top, the Porchettiamo festival gathers multiple producers from all over Italy, enabling porchetta partisans to taste, compare, and simply gorge. Middle from left: Matt Lindemulder, foreground, works at Porchetta in New York; a porchetta sandwich garnished with pickled red onions and fresh mustard leaves. Above from far left: a sign leading to the festival; a proprietor removed the pig's head; and after cooking for seven to eight hours in a specially designed long oven, the porchetta emerged.

ANDREW SCRIVANI FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

OUTDOOR PORCHETTA

TIME: ABOUT 5 HOURS
YIELD: 15 TO 20 SERVINGS

- **1 whole boneless skin-on pork shoulder**
- **Salt and ground black pepper**
- **8 to 10 garlic cloves, chopped**
- **3 tablespoons fennel pollen or minced fresh rosemary**
- **Crusty rolls (such as kaiser) or fresh focaccia, cut in half horizontally, for serving**

1. Use the tip of a sharp, strong knife to roughly score the skin into diamonds, about ¾ inch on each side.

2. Liberally season the inside of the roast with salt and pepper. Rub in garlic and fennel pollen or rosemary. With the skin on the outside, roll into a cylinder and tie tightly at 1- to 2-inch intervals.

3. On one side of a grill large enough for indirect cooking, rest a drip pan under the grate to catch the drippings. Pour in an inch or two of hot water to prevent flare-ups. You may need to top up or empty and refill the pan once during the cooking, depending on how fatty the roast is.

4. Heat the other side of the grill to high. Place the tied roast on the other side, away from the direct heat, and close the grill.

5. Roast at 350 to 375 degrees (the temperature can hover between the two), turning occasionally, until a meat thermometer inserted into the thickest part of the roast registers 140 degrees, about 3 to 4 hours. (The temperature will continue to rise as the meat rests.) If the meat is cooked through but the skin is not crisp, move the roast to the part of the grill that sits over direct, high heat. Cook with the grill open, turning often, just until sizzling and crisp (not more than 10 minutes, to prevent overcooking).

6. Let rest, tented loosely with foil, at least 20 minutes before slicing. (A bread knife is useful to cut through the skin.) The meat can be served hot or at room temperature. Serve in sandwiches on crusty rolls, or inside split pieces of focaccia.