



THE KIND COWBOY OF DEVIL'S GULCH RANCH

By Marcia Gagliardi



THERE AREN'T MANY OF US WHO CAN SAY WE DREAMED THAT WE WANTED TO BE A COWBOY AT THE AGE OF TWO, AND THEN ENDED UP BECOMING ONE. BUT MARK PASTERNAK KNEW THAT WAS WHAT HE WAS DESTINED TO BE, AND STAYING IN LOS ANGELES WAS NOT GOING TO FULFILL HIS COWBOY DREAMS. WHEN HE WAS 19 HE MOVED TO NORTHERN CALIFORNIA, AND IN 1971 HE BOUGHT 65 ACRES OF LAND CALLED DEVIL'S GULCH RANCH (WITH SOME HELP FROM DAD) IN NICASIO, A PICTURESQUE AREA IN MARIN COUNTY BETWEEN NICASIO VALLEY AND PAPER MILL CREEK. WHILE DEVIL'S GULCH MAY HAVE A SINISTER RING TO IT, PASTERNAK IS ONE OF THE KINDEST AND MOST ETHICAL FARMERS YOU COULD EVER HOPE TO MEET.



PIGS

Mark began by raising pigs at Devil's Gulch, and says they were one of the easier animals to start with since they're hearty and eat a variety of scraps (he didn't have enough grazing land to raise cattle). He went to his first livestock auction—admitting he had no idea what he was doing—and came home with a couple pigs he certainly overpaid for. Fortunately, a few farmer neighbors in the area gave him some pointers on feeding and raising the pigs, and he soon found good by-product feed sources, like whey from the Marin French Cheese factory, soybean pulp, and French bread. Once, he gave his pigs some free fishmeal, which absolutely ruined the taste of their meat (“It was the biggest mistake I ever made!”). Like the Ibérico pigs in Spain, whose meat is sweet from the acorns they feast on in the fall, ultimately you are what you eat.

Being omnivores, the pigs he raises now are offered a varied (and hormone-free) diet of whole-wheat and organic bread and wheat tortillas, whey (which gives the meat flavor, like the pigs in Parma, Italy), whole milk (for nutrition), produce, and brewer's grain from breweries like Fort Point and Lagunitas. They need carbohydrates and fat to gain weight. Mark notes that barley is great for pigs, not only for nutrition, but because it also ends up adding much a better flavor than corn, which is what commodity pigs are often fed. He shares that a lot of people involved in the feeding and finishing of animals, both here and in Europe, have come to the conclusion corn is ultimately not the best for flavor. Corn may be one of the cheapest sources of a high nutrition and energy-rich feed, but it doesn't impart much flavor—it's fairly neutral. “If the meat doesn't taste good,

then what's the point?”, Mark asks. It's the whole milk and grains they use that really make a difference in imparting a rich flavor to Devil's Gulch pigs.

Another big factor is how 30 years of raising pigs has informed Mark's preferences for the breeds he uses. He prefers crossbreeding Berkshire boars with Yorkshire sows, which he says have good maternal instincts and big litters (and lots of milk). He also uses a bit of Duroc, Old Spot, and Hampshire sows. Ultimately this crossbreeding leads to heavily muscled pigs with good intramuscular marbling, which is where the flavor is.

The pigs are free-range and pastured, with a barn for shelter. When the sows have their babies, they are given special stalls, and eventually the piglets are pastured with their mothers until they are weaned. Devil's Gulch partners with DG Langley Farms, raising around 30–40 sows each on 10 acres, and eventually moving them to other sites.

Harvested after 7–8 months, the humanely raised Devil's Gulch pigs have a very different existence than the pigs raised in confinement on mass farms in Iowa, for example. Those animals never see the light of day, never have their hooves touch dirt, never eat anything that isn't pumped full of antibiotics, and are harvested after just four-and-a-half months. Mark says, when you learn what commodity pigs are fed, it's just not appetizing. Mark cares a lot about keeping people informed, and he even has a sheet you can ask for if you see him at the farmers market, with questions to ask your local butcher so you can do your due diligence on learning how an animal was raised.







RABBITS

Perhaps what Devil's Gulch Ranch is most known for is their rabbits, and it's funny how chance played a part in that. In the early 90s, Mark's wife Myriam (a veterinarian) was raising rabbits as part of a 4-H project with their daughter. Myriam's French mother, a fabulous cook, was preparing rabbit for dinner for a local French chef. After a few bites, he asked where they got their exquisite rabbit, which at the time was something rather hard to find, and they told him they had raised it themselves. Soon, word got out to Chez Panisse, Jardinière, and even the French Laundry, who all wanted these fresh and local rabbits. Fortunately, rabbits breed like they are reputed to do.

While in 4-H, Myriam began raising the Rex breed of rabbit, which is a dual-purpose breed: its pelt is some of the finest fur, and the meat is also quite good. But once the Pasternaks realized that they needed to ramp up production, they introduced California and New Zealand breeds, which grow faster, and are utilized more for their meat. Mark says that he likes to cross breed for hybrid vigor, which allows them to select for various characteristics. The Pasternaks like the rabbits to have individuality, instead of being a sea of white rabbits. They are currently trying to breed a "zabbit," which (for now) has a couple zebra-like stripes around its neck. They not only sell the meat to many top restaurants, they also tan the hides and sell the pelts at their farmers market stands, and even sell the feet for cat toys (and of course, lucky rabbit foot keychains), while the manure ends up as fertilizer for the ranch's surrounding vineyards.

Rabbits are considered a pseudo-ruminant, so the Pasternaks feed them an all-vegetable pelleted diet, which is mostly alfalfa (without corn or antibiotics). While you can feed rabbits organically, unfortunately it's very difficult to raise rabbits commercially and certify them as organic, mostly due to the challenges in granting access to free-range areas (They don't come back!) required for national organic certification (and to be sold in Whole Foods). Special pens need to be built, and the rabbits can easily get sick with exposure to the elements (or eaten, or run away), and the Pasternaks believe that ultimately those practices are not humane.

Devil's Gulch raises their rabbits in cages that are much larger than conventional cages, suited with regular cage floors, which allows for easier maintenance and cleanliness. There are around 300 does in their barn, but that number goes up to 2,000 when you include all the babies, and they sell about 100 fryers a week.

The rabbits are transported to Turlock for processing, but a challenge for small livestock producers is that sometimes there aren't enough rabbits to process that week (the processor will run a slaughter with other producers), so there can be a hold or occasional hiccup. Some rabbits can be trucked in from as far away as Idaho or Canada, which means they have been on a truck for a couple days, which affects the quality. Devil's Gulch rabbits have less distance to travel, which makes for superior meat (and livers, too).



& SHEEP

You'll also see a number of "weeder" sheep on the ranch that Mark uses to control weeds in the vineyards during the winter (in the spring, you don't want sheep to nibble on the vines, so Mark moves them out to other pastures when the vines start budding). There are 100 ewes of the Katahdin breed, which are hearty and have lots of babies. They are hair sheep and don't produce a fleece, so you don't have to shear them, which is making them a popular breed for livestock farmers who want to raise them for meat.

These sheep birth lambs year-round and not just in the mid-winter and early spring (although there are some lulls throughout the year). The Pasternaks harvest these lambs around six months old, at 40 to 50 pounds (they are ruminants, and Mark insists that they should be strictly grass-fed). The sheep are brought in at night, but the Pasternaks have also raised some livestock guardian dogs to keep an eye on them and make sure they're safe from predators, like coyotes and mountain lions.

You can find Devil's Gulch Ranch products at the Ferry Plaza farmers market on Saturdays, and at the Marin Community College market on Sundays. Their meats are also sold at Bi-Rite Markets, The Local Butcher Shop in Berkeley, El Salchichero in Santa Cruz, Cooper's Public Market in Novato, and the Marin County Community Farmstand in Forest Knolls, Marin.

Marcia Gagliardi is the founder of the weekly tablehopper e-column; subscribe and get Bay Area food news and restaurant gossip at tablehopper.com. Follow her on Twitter: [@tablehopper](https://twitter.com/tablehopper).



