

THE BEAUTY OF LARD

(seriously)

I have been dreaming of lard for months. Dreaming of full-flavoured refritos, fried for authenticity in melted pig fat. Of perfect pastry, shattering into a hundred savoury flakes at the touch of a fork. Of fluffy biscuits and crisper-than-crisp fried chicken. Of all the good things that lard makes better.

LARD, FOR ME, HAS BECOME A SYMBOL OF PERFECTION in cooking. It is a multi-tasking powerhouse in the kitchen, turning out top-notch versions of everything from the most delicate pastries to the most down-home fried chicken, all with a lip-smacking flavour that puts Crisco to shame. I am longing to get my hands on some lard.

"Longing for a heart attack, you mean," says a friend, echoing the sentiments of many others with whom I have discussed this fat of my fantasies. Fortunately for me, my friends are misinformed.

Lard is a much healthier fat than vegetable shortening. Unbelievable, considering all we have been told for the past 30 years, but true. Vegetable shortening is hydrogenated. Any fat that has been hydrogenated, even partially, has proved itself much worse for human health than any of the naturally saturated fats we have long been told to eliminate from our diets. However, if saturated fat still concerns you, you should know that lard is only 40 percent saturated fat. Compared with butter (66 percent) or palm oil (81 percent), lard is a HeartSmart choice.

So I am at peace with both my palate and my arteries as I begin my quest for really great lard.

My quest could begin and end with a quick visit to my local Thrifty's, but supermarket lard doesn't cut it. Aside from my reluctance to eat fat from a pig raised in a possibly unethical manner, I do not want to use lard that has been hydrogenated for stability, pumped with preservatives and sitting on a shelf for months. The lard I want should be fresh, flavourful and non-hydrogenated.

Finding the lard of my dreams on the hoof, so to speak, proves to be a bit difficult in the Capital Region. I quickly learn that if I want *fresh* lard, I must render it myself. Although no local butchers sell freshly rendered lard, almost every single one from Sidney to the Western Communities sells pork fat, the precursor of lard. Some keep it in stock at all times, some bring it in for you within the week.

Before making any purchases, I expand my search to include local, organic pork fat. I phone Kildara Farms, a certified organic farm in Deep Cove that supplies its customers with everything from arugula to herbs to organically raised meats.

Brian Hughes, who, with his wife Daphne, owns and runs the farm, describes for me how their organic hogs are raised. The animals live in the outdoors, feeding on wild weeds and organic greens. They also eat certified organic hog feed and kelp meal. They are given no growth hormones and no antibiotics. After six months, the pigs are ready to eat.

Hughes tells me, when they sell meat they get rid of all the fat because no one has ever asked for it. "We could get the fat from our butcher and set it aside if anyone who wanted it," he says, and my heart begins to race. I am on the verge of achieving pig fat euphoria! But I am deflated in the next moment when he tells me they don't have any pigs on the farm at present.

The next step is a trip to Slater's First Class Meats, an excellent butcher shop that specializes in naturally raised and organic meats. Behind the counter is Rick Milburn, a man in whom I find a fellow lard enthusiast. After filling my order for five pounds of naturally raised pork fat, he spends a few minutes discussing with me the merits of lard, which he describes as a "pure, snow-white product." Together, we bemoan lard's negative image.

"You should start a lard revolution," he says with a hearty laugh. Exactly.

When I return the following week to collect my pork fat, I ask to have the phone number of their pork supplier. I want to find out how "naturally raised" compares to organic.

At home, I begin pouring through my old cookbooks, looking for information on proper rendering. Pork fat is not 100 percent fat. It also contains water, connective tissue and other impurities that must be removed from the pure fat. According to my books, this is easily done by dicing up all the fat and melting it over low heat. Eventually the water evaporates and the lard "renders out" of the connective tissue. But my research uncovers new information. I have bought the wrong kind of pork fat! The best lard, all the books say, comes from the "leaf," or kidney fat, of the pig. I have in front of me a slab from the back—only the second-best choice.

Frantically, I phone the biggest butchers in town, but not one can provide me with any kidney fat. My quest for the best lard suddenly seems impossibly difficult.



Author Heidi Fink with pie and jar of lard

So, I render my back fat. The fat smells. It is very greasy and tough to cut into the tiny dice my books all recommend. It smells even more rank as it begins to simmer on my stove. The lard takes six hours to render out properly. After straining, the liquid fat is brown and smells like deep-fried meat. Even after it solidifies into a snowy white mass, I can't imagine making a pie with it. I do anyway.

The pie crust is nothing short of magnificent—perfectly tender and flaky with an amazing flavour brought about by the mingling of sweet butter and savoury lard. Even my most fat-conscious friends devour their slices. But a tiny worm is infesting the apple of my triumph. How much better would this pie be if made with leaf lard?

By this time, I have managed to get in touch with Ron of Hertel's Fine Pork Products, the supplier to Slater's. Ron tells me that "naturally raised pork" has no guidelines of any kind, but in his business, the term applies to grain-fed hogs, given no growth hormones and no antibiotics, unless an animal is ill.

"A pig can be raised 'naturally' in someone's backyard and fed scraps, but you wouldn't want to eat that pig," he says. "The hogs that I process all come from local farms meeting the Canadian Quality Assurance standards. They are beautiful, well-run barns."

Not organic, but I can live with it, especially since Hertel's also turns out to be a supplier of the coveted leaf fat. Ron tells me that although they don't normally deal with single customers, anyone who wants to can order Hertel's leaf fat through Slater's First Class Meats.

A few days later, I pick up my three kilograms (6.6 pounds) of leaf fat. I bring it home to render and immediately like it better than the back fat. For one thing, it is easier to dice. For another, it doesn't smell as bad. Even as it is cooking, the leaf fat never develops more than a crispy fried-chicken aroma. Also, the same amount of fat renders out in less than two hours, and I get a better yield. I am so excited, I make a pie with it as soon as I can.

Even before my leaf lard pie goes into the oven, I can tell it is going to be fantastic. The lard has a light, almost brittle, feel to it as I cut it into the flour for my crust. When I taste the finished pie, I know that I hold perfection among pie crusts. With an extra shatteringly crisp and flaky texture and special flavour, it is everything a great pie crust should be. I want to eat the crust by itself, it's that good.

But has it been worth it? For me, yes. Fresh lard has lived up to its legendary status. The endless phone calls, the tedious fat dicing, the smell, the rendering, all have been worth it to achieve the realization of my culinary dreams.

Now, all that lies between me and pure bliss are the makings of a few other lard-enhanced treats: refritos, tamales, fried chicken, doughnuts, ragoût, fluffy biscuits ... I'll let you know how they turn out. EAT!

RECIPE

The Legendary Lard Pie Crust

For one double crust 9-inch pie

- 2 1/2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 tsp salt
- 2 Tbsp. sugar
- 3/4 cup chilled unsalted butter, cut into pieces
- 1/2 cup chilled lard, cut into pieces
- 6 Tbsp. cold water

Mix flour, salt and sugar in food processor. Add the butter pieces and cut into the flour using five to 10 pulses. Add lard pieces and continue pulsing until the pieces of fat range in size from bits of cornmeal to small peas. Dump mixture into a medium-sized mixing bowl.

Sprinkle the water over the mixture and use a rubber spatula or thin wooden spoon to mix. The dough will seem very dry. Use your hands to form into a ball, adding up to three more tablespoons of water if the dough won't stick together. Divide the dough into two discs, wrap each with plastic wrap, and refrigerate until ready to roll out.

EPICURE AND TRAVEL