

Fitchburg STAR

Thursday, October 18, 2007 • Vol. 32, No. 15



© S.V. Medaris

A DIGRESSION ON SWINE

We used to be very close to our hogs. An exhibit at the Madison Public Library, "The Whole Hog," lets us get in touch with our porcine buddies. The paintings by S.V. Medaris, such as "Domestication of a Wild Hog," are worth a look. For more information, see page 9.

Thursday, October 18, 2007

STAR COMMUNITY

9

Fitchburg's pigs: Mostly gone but still fondly remembered

Yes, I love pigs. Really. It all came back to me at "The Whole Hog" exhibit at the Madison Central Library, featuring pig-related works by artist Sue Medaris.

Go see it. It's a treat.

Mind you, it's a different kind of affection, one exempt from the angst and bleating surrounding the human variants of the experience. Only someone who has spent an inordinate amount of time around pigs could understand.

Medaris understands. Definitely.

She raises pigs, likes them, draws them – and eats a few of them.

She raises seven or eight pigs a year on her farm in southern Wisconsin, some of the conventional "meat" hogs that grow so fast she worries that their legs will buckle and gives them eggs and other feeds to foster bone

paintings or they remind them of their childhood experiences with livestock.

She loves the questions that kids ask when they see the paintings.

Editorial License

By KURT
GUTKNECHT

With their wrinkled skin and baleful expressions, Medaris's pigs bring us much closer to our agricultural past than we'll get from the meat market or car window.

I expected sentimentality from Medaris and a riff on the evils of contemporary farming. There was neither, just a statement about "showing the way of rural life." Rural life has the same permutations as life anywhere else. Some aspects are pleasant. Some aren't.

Save for one farm, the pigs are gone from Fitchburg.

And commercial hog production is widely pilloried as industrial farming or factory farms. Even the industry admits it might have gone too far in breeding hogs that grow too fast and are too lean. Some processors now add a little moisture to compensate.

The Uphoffs who raise hogs in the town of Dunn exemplify our contradictory attitudes toward pigs.

By preserving farmland, the Uphoff farm has a special place among conservationists and environmentalists, although they usually say little about the farm's pigs.

Since 2000, the Uphoffs switched production from conventional hogs to Berkshires, a more temperamental breed that also produces pork with more flavor-rich fat deposits. About 70 percent of the pork from the farm ends up in Japan, where the Berkshires have a special place in the country's history and are known as the "Emperor's Hog," having been given as a gift to the Emperor in the 1600s.

The environmental cachet fostered by these pigs is the byproduct of practices that environmentalists would eschew in other circumstances – corn fed, fatty and widely traveled.

In a time when many recommend expunging diets of most livestock fat, there's a counter-movement that believes it is tasty and can be healthy, far less a villain in our health woes than the nutrient-empty diets based largely on corn fructose and white flour.

In an 2005 article in the New York Times, Corby Kummer praised the culinary and nutritional merits of lard, which has "half the level

The Whole Hog

S. V. Medaris's exhibit, "The Whole Hog," will be on display until Oct.30 at Madison Central Library, 201 W. Mifflin St.

Medaris has painted several other species, including cows, dogs and chickens (<http://svmedaris.com>).

of saturated fat of palm kernel oil (about 80 percent saturated fat) or coconut oil (about 85 percent) and its approximately 40 percent saturated fat is lower than butter's nearly 60 percent," which could be just the ticket for lowering levels of harmful trans fats.

Even if lard doesn't make a comeback, there's something to be said for getting to know pigs.

We farm kids were nonplussed when city visitors came out and gushed over the livestock, often larding their observations with mawkish sentimentality. We had a symbiotic relationship with livestock, governed by pragmatism and, yes, mutual respect.

Medaris's paintings are the next best thing to hanging around with pigs.

Unlike the affection between man and dog, cat, goldfish and parrots, a person's relationship with swine tend not to be sullied by anthropomorphic tendencies and excessive indulgence.

A pig is accessible but not overly affectionate. Under the right circumstances, it can be greedy and insistent about filling its single

stomach (in other words, a real pig), but it also has a softer side. When satiated, a pig is willing to serve as a warm and undemanding pillow.

Most human-pig relationships are governed by the knowledge that, after a certain point, one will eat the other. The human is usually doing the eating but every rural newspaper has carried a story about the reverse situation, usually involving a cranky sow.

There is still affection between man and bovines in America's Dairyland, but it is an unequal relationship because the scale is wrong. Sooner or later, the relationship sours when one of the parties reaches 1,400 pounds. There's also the matter of the bovine's four stomachs.

Sheep and goats can be inordinately stubborn and standoffish and tend to prefer their own kind. There's also the submissive-dominant thing, as evidenced by inordinate control exerted by shearers.

It is very difficult to herd pigs.

Most pigs have been engineered until they're just a ham torpedo with legs. However, gourmands are supporting niche markets for endangered breeds raised in open spaces.

My acquaintance with pigs spanned about three decades, reaching its zenith during my early teens when I won the showmanship award for hogs at the county fair. I snoozed in the same pen with my award-winning Yorkshire during the fair, and went home covered in boils, which was not the pig's fault.

Medaris's paintings brought back a host of piggy memories, many of them colored by sentimentality and fogged by the passage of several decades.

It's too bad we don't have more pig pens and pigs here, but it's unlikely that hogs have much of a future in our antiseptic, high-tech plans.

Our pigs may be gone. They should never be completely forgotten, however.



S. V. Medaris

"Some Pig," acrylic on canvas, 10 feet x 18 feet.

growth.

She has few "wild" type hogs, whose feral instincts are still evident when they pull back and look for predators after every mouthful. She is mastering the fine points of pig husbandry, a rare skill for an artist.

She said that her art is accessible and uncomplicated. Buyers often say they like her