

NOIR DE BIGORRE PIG – FROM EXTINCTION TO EXCEPTION

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ABSTRACT

The article presents the history and preservation of the pig breed Noir de Bigorre, which was almost lost. The organisation of the chain, creation of quality labels and promotional activities are portrayed. Principal elements and rules which should be respected are presented and an overview of the state of the art and the foreseen developments are given.

Key words: Noir de Bigorre pig / quality labels / breed preservation / biodiversity

1 STORY OF A RESCUE IN EXTREMIS (1981–1989)

In 1981, in the year of patrimony, the French state and European Union launched a program of preservation of genetic heritage. The purpose was to save different plant varieties or animal species threatened with extinction due to the intensification of agriculture, and search for productivity. In the South West of France, more precisely in the Hautes Pyrenees, a pig breed in danger of extinction, was the subject of this program; the Noir de Bigorre Pig (with black coat colour, also known as Gascon pig breed, Fig. 1). While there were 28,000 sows in the 1930s, there were only two boars and 34 sows fortunately preserved in some farms of Bigorre, historical cradle of the breed. As a first step, through a meticulous investigation in the field, identification of all animals was performed to determine their origin and to organize breeding in a way to ensure sufficient genetic diversity to save the breed. Enthusiastic breeders were mostly older people who kept these animals because of the attachment to family assets, but ceasing gradually their activity. Thus maintaining a sufficient number of breeding pigs became increasingly difficult. If at the end of the 1990 the breed was technically saved, it still remained insecure because

it still did not offer a sufficient income to those who had saved it. The new challenge was to find trade opportunities which could sustain the activity, and restore its place in the local economy.



Figure 1: Noir de Bigorre Pig (Photo: FDM Communication)

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2 THE START OF PRODUCTION (1990-1994)

Compared to conventional pig production, the Noir de Bigorre Pig suffers from limitation factors like the need for outer space, slow growth, high feed costs, and a too big proportion of fat. But it presents two major advantages (previously being neglected because these pigs do not correspond to the industrial production of lean and cheap pork), the incomparable flavour of its meat and unique qualities of its fat. The challenge was thus clear; it was necessary to produce and successfully put on the market products of high quality at prices high enough to obtain a return of higher production costs. The basic idea of the project, against the dominant practices of the time, was to adapt the rearing of livestock to natural rhythms of Noir de Bigorre pig, and thus to raise pigs in a traditional way, using at maximum food resources of the natural environment, to find eating quality that is special, in particular concerning the most noble parts, a product likely to bear its reputation: a ham.

To carry out this idea, it became important to involve new partners in the process, including the professionals in cured meats sector, with the common goal to reach the quality level of great hams of Spain, made from Iberian breed and raised in special ecosystem (fattened with acorns). The very low yield of Noir de Bigorre pigs as compared to lean type "industrial" pigs (average daily gain of 450 g/day against 800 g/day, respectively) and long seasoning of hams (20 months), generate significant additional production costs. Therefore the commitment of all actors was crucial because it takes three years between the birth of pigs and the marketing of their hams. Today, more than twenty years later, the Noir de Bigorre ham is known for its great taste and quality and represents a reference on the French market.

3 A NEW CHALLENGE-ORGANIZATION OF THE PRODUCTION CHAIN (1995-2001)

To support and manage the development of the production, a chain was gradually organized. In 1994, the administrative birth took place by creation of the Association of Noir de Bigorre Breeders. In 1997 the breed was officially recognized by the Ministry of Agriculture and the respective control was set up. In the follow-up the creation of Consortium of Noir de Bigorre (Consortium, 2013) enabled to unite all the actors along the chain within an interprofessional association that brings together all the partners: farmers, butchers, caterers, meat processors, cooks and other qualified individuals. It is the

Consortium of Noir de Bigorre that defines goals of production and quality along with business strategy of the sector. It performs promotional activities and also, under the control of a certification body, monitors the use of the *Certificat de conformité*¹ quality label (Fig. 2) which was obtained in 2000. Finally, the Consortium takes steps to



Figure 2: The logotype of Noir de Bigorre pig

the recognition of two PDO² – "Porc Noir de Bigorre" and "Jambon Noir de Bigorre" (Fig. 3). In 2000, people passionate of Noir de Bigorre gathered to form Aroù, the Brotherhood of Friends of Noir de Bigorre. This circle, whose members are mostly from the sector (farmers and producers) initiated media events with some famous personalities joining the circle, and represents the main promotional medium. Finally, in June 2001, an agricultural interest company "Société du Porc Noir de Bigorre" was founded to supply high-class customers with fresh meat, i.e. wholesalers and restaurants.



Figure 3: Dry-cured ham "Jambon Noir de Bigorre" (Photo: FDM Communication)

Today, the industry is characterized by its complete organization, essential for the quality development planned. To strengthen further the process, South European Federation of indigenous extensive pig (FESERPAE, 2013) was founded in the frame of an Interreg

1 »Certificat de conformité« is a French quality label submitted to a process of certification.

2 PDO (protected denomination of origin) is a label according to the European quality policy

project between the Consortium Noir de Bigorre Pig, AECERIBER representing the Iberian pig breed in Spain, and ACPA ANCPA representing the pig breed Alentejo in Portugal. This association aims to create research and development base to support initiatives related to ancient Iberian breeds, to exchange the experiences, and to promote at the level of European institutions husbandry systems taking into account the whole ecosystem: the animal and its natural environment, the humans, culture and specific know-how. Finally, the products from Noir de Bigorre Pig are also essential and part of for Slow Food movement.

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The products of Noir de Bigorre have a story that sticks to the culture of region. This pig was shaped by the country and its people and is part of the landscape. In this area, the encounter of wind Foehn, a dry wind from the South crossing the Pyrenees, and wet West winds from Atlantic provide a perfect climate for drying of hams. On the other hand, pigs used to be a source of fat, as traditionally the dishes were prepared in/with pig fat which was a sign of wealth. This is why fat thickness is significantly higher than in lean type intensive pigs (60% lean meat content against only 42% for Noir de Bigorre Pig). This disadvantage of Noir de Bigorre for the market of modern pigs differentiates Noir de Bigorre and these lipids have become an undeniable asset. Fat infiltrated in the muscle gives meat a marbled look and a tasty and melting sensation confirmed in the unique experience of tasting the Noir de Bigorre ham.

5 OVERVIEW AND OBJECTIVES

After thirty years of work, the sector “Noir de Bigorre” is now a well structured organization which has

succeeded to establish an economic and financial balance and maintain an equitable distribution of the margin between the partners. Thanks to the commitment of its protagonists, it is kept in mind that the production must remain at high level in quality sense along with quantity controlled in order to preserve the exceptional character. Finally, the next project is to work on the development of farms for the best integration into the environment and landscape. The production is now 9,000 pigs per year giving 18,000 hams. The breeding herd has 850 sows in 55 herds. The development of production is controlled, so as to respond to the demand while taking care of high product quality.

6 PRINCIPAL ELEMENTS IN THE SPECIFICATION

- pigs must be purebred, progeny of breeding sows and boars registered in the herd book
- pigs must be raised on open pasture or in the woods, at least the last 6 months of their lives, and slaughtered at age of at least 1 year (14 months on average).
- their number is limited to 25 pigs per hectare
- their nutrition is based on grass, cereals (at least 70% of the ration), acorns, chestnuts and other natural resources (subproducts, growth promoters and GMOs are strictly prohibited),
- salting of hams (particularly mild) is performed with salt from Adour
- seasoning of hams is minimum 20 months

7 REFERENCES

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