

Italy Update

Reports from the Maggie's Farm Apprentices in Tuscany

When Pigs Fly

Four of the heritage pigs we have been caring for here at Spannocchia suddenly disappeared in the dead of the night last Sunday. "Don't worry," Riccio, the farm manager, assured us. "The pigs have gone to slaughter, but they'll be back by noon. We'll have to drop everything and start working on them right away in the Transformation Kitchen. Things will get very intense." As all of us who were interested in helping with the butchering found out this week, Riccio was not kidding.

Spannocchia's prize product is its pigs, a local heritage breed called *Cinta Senese*. The name literally means "Sienese Belted," because of a pink band that encircles each animal from front toe to front toe. Although they were the traditional pig of the Siena region for nearly a thousand years, they almost died out in the 20th century, since they are poorly suited to modern feedlot conditions. Spannocchia luckily has the space to let them roam free in large swaths of forest, so they have thrived here and become breeding stock for lots of other farms interested in their revival.

It was hard to think about any of that high-minded agricultural virtue, however, as Riccio swung each half carcass over his shoulders and hoisted them from the delivery truck to the Transformation Kitchen later Monday morning. It was a shock to see the dead animal still intact from bristly snout to curly tail. Italian slaughterhouses leave

all the butchering to the customer, so our object for the week would be literally to transform every last bit of these animals into meat.

First came the crude butchering and the prosciutto. Mike and Meredith helped Riccio cut away the back legs of each carcass to be buried in salt for three weeks and then hung to age for a year or more. The rest of their day was spent chopping furiously to divide the whole carcasses into smaller parts that would be needed to make the other products.

Tuesday, Jennifer Core and Bonnie helped make sausage and salami, which meant grinding up lots of meat and squeezing it into casings to hang and age. Both of them were up to their arms in a huge pile of ground meat and fat, kneading it all together to make a uniform product under the watchful eyes of Riccio and the butcher.

On the last day, Bill and Patrick were in charge of making lard and head cheese. For head cheese, the bits of meat too small to be cut are boiled out of the head, ears, tails, and kidneys. While this was cooking away, the fat was ground and boiled in another pot to produce liquid lard and little bacon bits called *ciccioli*. I was skeptical when Riccio salted these cracklings and offered them to us as a Transformation Room snack, but after one heavenly handful I was sold.

As a celebration of these animals, we ate a lot of pork products this week. Even when some tastes were unfamiliar, it felt pretty satisfying to be nourished by animals we had nurtured ourselves.