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Living XML

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Don't go hog-wild for genetically engineered pork yet

By Ana Veciana-Suarez
Knight Ridder News Service

I like my pork every which way. Pork rinds. Pork chops. Bacon. Ham. Baby back ribs. And, of course, the best of the best: a whole pig roasted slowly for Nochebuena.

Just writing about these culinary pleasures is enough to make my mouth water, and there are still hours upon hours to go until lunchtime. Be still, rumbling stomach.

It's a Cuban thing, I suppose. Or a Southern thing. Or a Caribbean thing. Whatever. Bacon in the morning and "pan con lechon" smothered with mojo and onions at dinner are my version of gastronomic heaven. "Mmmmm" good.

But pork ain't the best for us. Something about the high fat and salt content. (Actually, have you noticed how everything that's tasty is also bad? Surely there's some nefarious conspiracy in all this.) And because I want to live a long and fruitful life -- long enough, that is, to mortify my children -- I limit the quantity of piggy consumption. For the sake of my ticker, you see.

Now, there's news from the technology front that will delight all of us dutiful salmon consumers who would like to shake things up with bacon-wrapped dishes. Scientists say they have genetically engineered pigs to produce healthier pork products. These super pigs produce omega-3 fatty acids, the "good fat" that stops blood vessels from clogging and helps our bodies process cholesterol.

Most of us ingest this wonder food through fish, flaxseed, soybeans and some nuts and oils. Others simply pop a nutritional supplement. But now -- consider the possibilities: Heart-healthy pork chops! Nutritious bacon! Cholesterol-beating ham!

"When you consume the pork," study co-author Dr. Jing X. Kang told reporters, "you'll be able to get an omega-3 benefit similar to when you eat fish."

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And without that fishy smell permeating the kitchen, either. This could be the next best thing since sliced bread. Of course, such succulent dreams are still a ways off. No one knows what these omega-3 producing swine taste like. Some were slaughtered to undergo chemical tests; others have been kept alive for breeding purposes. But not a single one has been grilled, fried or baked.

And even if scientists decided to sacrifice one piggy for their personal taste test, the bitter reality is this: Scientists used a gene from an earthworm on the mutant pigs. Yes, a slimy, slithering earthworm.

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Yuks aside, we have to wonder if this will translate into worm-tasting pork. But let's not think about it, OK?

Jimmy Dean's omega-3 sausages won't hit the supermarket aisles any time soon, earthworm gene or not. All the extra salivating over recent news reports has been premature because federal regulators still have to OK the genetically modified pigs. That could take years. Besides, no modified animals have been approved as food products in the United States.

In the meantime, though, Dr. Kang is hard at work trying to boost omega-3 levels in other animal food products, namely chicken and cows. He previously completed work on omega-3 producing mice, but that hardly captured the attention of the famished news media, maybe because we don't like rodents with our scrambled eggs.

So I humbly suggest Dr. Kang refocus his work on other products that have been vilified by the food police. For instance, ice cream. I can't enjoy my mint chocolate chip without pangs of guilt. Surely there's a way to imbue it with antioxidant qualities.

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Another prime choice: Cheetos and Doritos. Can't we clone farm-raised tilapia that tastes and crunches like snack food? My boys would fall all over themselves for a plateful of that.

Let's not mention the earthworm gene, though. That's enough to upset the sturdiest of appetites.

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Ana Veciana-Suarez's column appears Sunday. Write to her at The Miami Herald, One Herald Plaza, Miami FL 33132, or send e-mail to aveciana@herald.com Knight Ridder News Service
