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High On The Hog: Why Investment Banker Chris Andersen Is Investing Millions In Raising The Kobe Beef Of Pork



Matthew Furman For Forbes

"Take a look at this little devil," says G. Chris Andersen, 77, rubbing the furry neck of one of his Mangalitsa pigs. "I'm crazy about these unbelievable animals."

The 100-pound 7-month-old beast, its auburn coat as thick as an Airedale's, snorts happily and kicks up dust onto Andersen's tasseled loafers. It presses into Andersen's hand before scratching its side on the metal bars of its spacious shelter, which opens onto a lush pasture. Beyond lie the gentle hills of northwestern New Jersey, an hour and a half from Manhattan, where Andersen spends most weekdays in a corner office of a gleaming 57th Street high-rise.

Andersen is an investment banker who worked at Drexel Burnham Lambert during the junk bond factory's glory days in the 1980s and survived its subsequent demise. For the last eight years he has been consumed by a passion for the Mangalitsa, an exotic variety of pig first bred in Hungary in the 1830s for a Hapsburg archduke. The meat

from the Mangalitsa is much fattier, darker and richer than factory-farmed pork. When Andersen first tasted it, he says, “it rocked me back to my socks.”

He loves his pigs, but he’s not happy about the way they’ve been draining his bank account. A self-described “food snob,” he got into pig farming mainly for fun, but he’s determined to make a real business out of it. The obstacles so far have ranged from his own inexperience to the difficulties of building an American market for an unfamiliar European delicacy. He compares his trials as a pig farmer with his efforts on Wall Street, where he came up with creative financing for fledgling companies like early cable provider TCI and cellphone pioneer McCaw Cellular. “I get off on challenges,” he says.

Andersen was clueless about pig farming when he started out. A hard charger, he spent 15 years at Drexel (the federal government never named Andersen in any civil or criminal action related to Drexel’s downfall in 1990). He was later vice chairman of PaineWebber for five years and now runs his own small firm.

Ten years ago he bought his first pigs after returning from a vacation in Spain, where he’d gorged on the ham known as Jamón Ibérico de Bellota, made from the black Iberian pig. At a Manhattan dinner party he bragged to friends that he could get them some. At the time, though, the Spanish ham was not available in the U.S. (import restrictions have since been lifted). Undeterred, Andersen figured he could make it himself. “I said, ‘I’m not a farmer, but I can raise a damn pig,’ ” he says.

The basic economics of Mangalitsa farming are pretty daunting. While commercially raised pigs spend their entire lives indoors, Andersen’s Mangalitsa are given open pasture to thrive. Factory-farmed sows produce litters of a dozen. By contrast, Andersen’s Mangalitsa have no more than seven babies. Those piglets take 15 months to grow to the ideal slaughter weight of 325 pounds. Commercial farms slaughter their pigs at five months and 280 pounds. And while Mangalitsa pork sells for a couple of dollars more per pound than the conventional kind, the market for it is small. “It’s very, very difficult to produce a profit with these pigs,” says Erno Hollo, a veterinarian in Basking Ridge, N.J. who raises them as a hobby. Despite the long odds, Andersen says he is determined to dominate high-end pork in America, and he thinks he’s about to break

through.

Andersen has pushed past roadblocks before. Severely dyslexic, he had a rough time in school growing up. His father was in the Air Force, and Andersen never spent more than a year in the same school. "Some would test me and say, 'You're a dummy,' " he recalls. " Others would say, 'You're brilliant, but you have terrible skills.' " Persistence and drive got him through the University of Colorado and then business school at Northwestern University. He's worked around his disability by conducting all of his business verbally, carrying a voice recorder and directing an assistant to transcribe memos to clients.

His porcine adventure started with one sow and her litter of a common breed called the Yorkshire. He put the animals in a pen on the 240-acre horse farm he owns in Branchville, N.J. Having heard that Spanish pigs eat acorns, he experimented with feed made from chestnut flour and goat's milk. The resulting meat didn't match his fantasy.

Next he tried the Berkshire, a black pig with rotund hindquarters that his wife thought were "cute" when they leafed through a book on pig breeds. This time he paid a golf course groundskeeper to collect acorns for feed. But again the meat was disappointing. After that came what he calls "a pig tour of Europe," where he returned to Spain and discovered that the acorns there were completely different from the American variety.

By 2007 he'd roped his personal chef, Michael Clampffer, into his pork quest. In the food magazine *Saveur* Clampffer read about the Mangalitsa, popular during the days of the Austro-Hungarian Empire but now nearly extinct. Clampffer bought some from a Washington State farmer named Heath Putnam and cooked up his first batch. "It was fabulous," says Clampffer. "It was unlike anything I had had before."

Andersen dived in, buying 80 pigs for \$20,000 and installing them on a second property he owns near the horse farm. He hired an Amish construction crew to convert an old barn into a state-of-the-art piggery with a perforated floor that collects waste, which he recycles as fertilizer. The white enclosure is surprisingly free of flies and stench. On a recent afternoon he pointed out a litter of adorable three-day-old piglets. Mangalitsa babies are striped, and adults mature into one of three colors: white, auburn or black with white bellies. Their tufted fur looks more like

sheep's wool than the sparse hair of the pink variety factory farmers raise from high-yielding hybrids.

Finally Andersen had hit on the kind of rich-tasting meat he had been craving. But he didn't own enough land in New Jersey to accommodate his growing herd. He wound up contracting with five farms in Iowa, Missouri and Pennsylvania, where he pays 20 farmers on a per-pig basis. On his three New Jersey farms he has another 20 staffers. He now has 4,500 pigs and plans to quadruple that.

Another challenge that turned into a money suck: finding an abattoir that could handle the Mangalitsa. Because the animals have nearly four times the fat of commercial pigs (which can be butchered in minutes), an experienced butcher must spend an hour taking each one apart by hand. When Andersen started his Mangalitsa operation, only one slaughterhouse, in Missouri, would take his pigs after Andersen flew in a butcher from Austria to demonstrate the correct technique. Shipping animals there and back cost tens of thousands of dollars. He has since found slaughterhouses in New Jersey and Pennsylvania that can handle his pigs.

Andersen still works as an investment banker, taking time out for exotic vacations arranged by his 52-year-old Korean-born second wife, Sung, to spots like Rajasthan and Tierra del Fuego. But the pig venture is never far from his mind. On weekdays he wears a pig lapel pin on his suit, and on the weekends the pin is on the collar of a polo shirt emblazoned with an embroidered yellow patch showing a mature gray Mangalitsa wearing a red crown, to signify its royal lineage, above the words "Mangalitsa by Mosefund." He named his pig business after a Danish uncle's country cabin.

Andersen has become an evangelist for the Mangalitsa ("People don't understand that it's not fat that makes you fat!") and a critic of USDA regulations that constrain his business. "I can't slaughter a pig on my farm and sell it," he complains. "I have to slaughter it in a USDA facility."

Clampffer works in the pig business full-time; Andersen has brought in another chef, Alex Stotler, to handle sales and, as chief operating officer, Ron Naples, who used to run his own inn in Vermont.

At the Mosefund Farm booth at the Sussex County

Fair, Andersen insists on treating me to a Mangalitsa burger. It is like no hamburger I have tasted, overflowing with juices, with a delicate pork flavor that is both sweet and salty, and a scrumptious crust that comes from the bacon Andersen grinds into the patty. It is fatty but, as he promised, not heavy, and the half-pound, usually more than I can handle, leaves me feeling satisfied but not at all sluggish.

After much trial, error and persistence, Andersen believes he's finally found a way to turn a handsome profit. Having failed to make money selling fresh meat, sausage and bacon, he's moving into more sophisticated, and much more expensive, charcuterie and salumi. Andersen says he is finalizing agreements with several household-name national retailers to sell cured and aged Mangalitsa, including culatello, a choice Italian-style cut that must hang for up to 12 months inside a pig's bladder wrapped in twine. Culatello can fetch \$43 a pound wholesale and \$60 retail, as opposed to the \$10 to \$19 Andersen has been banking per pound from fresh meat. At the moment he sells to more than 40 restaurants, including celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay's BurGR in Las Vegas and Manhattan's Daniel and Restaurant Marc Forgione, run by the former Iron Chef contestant. He also sells to the public online and at farmers' markets. But he says he grossed only \$1 million in revenue last year with more than \$5 million in expenses.

An irrepressible optimist, Andersen is sure his cured meats will catch on and that the public will develop a taste for Mangalitsa. He's entering the charcuterie market on an upswing and tapping into the move away from lean cuts promoted by people who favor meat-centric menus like the paleo diet.

"I got into this because I wanted to prove that I could make one of the most delicious lines of pork products in the world," he says. "I want to be at the top of the pyramid with quality products, that help make sure people are fed better-tasting, healthier food. I'm trying to bring back what a pig should be."

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