



THE FRENCH CONNECTION

LONG THE POSTER GIRL FOR ARTISANAL MEATS, ARIANE DAGUIN IS TURNING THE OZARKS INTO A CORNER OF GASCONY, ONE PIG FARM AT A TIME. BY MICHAEL SANDERS

When I first met Ariane Daguin, I'm sure I had a big smile on my face. I don't know what I'd expected the owner of the D'Artagnan specialty-foods company to look like, but the six-foot-tall, curly-haired dynamo in pink clogs, tight cranberry-hued jeans, gauzy flower-print blouse, and flowing scarf who was waiting for me at the St. Louis airport was certainly a welcome sight. As we headed toward the rental car, she introduced herself in an accent as redolent of rural France as one of D'Artagnan's duck-liver mousses, giving the impression she'd been in America three weeks rather than the three decades that have passed since her days as an au pair and political science major at Barnard.

The part of Daguin's story that many of us know began in 1984, when two men with a foie gras—one they had produced on their Hudson Valley farm—walked into the Manhattan charcuterie where she then worked. "It looked like the first foie gras in America, an important moment!" Daguin told me later, explaining why she had quit her job, found a partner, cashed in her savings, and started her company with Commonwealth Farms' foie gras as its first, exclusive product. Thus was born D'Artagnan, which soon offered exotic game birds and organic

poultry, and then venison, rabbit, lamb, beef, and nearly any other meat a chef might want to shake a cleaver at; wild mushrooms, truffles, and foraged greens weren't far behind. For nearly 25 years, the company has been at the forefront of the artisanal-food movement we now take for granted.

Daguin and I were headed west, to central Missouri's Osage County, to explore another side of her story: some very special pigs and Russ Kremer, one of the farmers who raise them. Kremer leads the Missouri Farmers' Union, a cooperative that Daguin has helped grow into a trusted, sustainable supplier of heirloom pork, particularly the much-prized Berkshire breed.

Daguin has nurtured many of her producers from the ground up, inspired by practices she first encountered in her native Gascony. There, chefs work hand in hand with small groups of local farmers, who focus on a single type of animal in order to produce the highest quality. This business model is based largely on a close relationship: D'Artagnan and the Farmers' Union, for example, are interdependent, their identities and their reputations tied up together in one authentic package.

As the gently undulating, nearly treeless expanse of eastern Missouri rolled past, Daguin talked about her youth, growing



One for all, all for one: Inspired in part by the Gascon Musketeer D'Artagnan, Daguin works with producers who are committed to their animals.

up in and around Hôtel de France, her family's *Michelin* two-star inn and restaurant in Auch. "It was like Eloise at The Plaza," she said with her trademark deep-throated chuckle. "For our after-school snack, we'd go into the *garde-manger* and raid it, cut pieces from the hanging *saucissons* and hams, eat the prune-and-Armagnac ice cream." At Eloise's tender age, however, Daguin was boning ducks and making pâtés and terrines in the kitchen, absorbing lessons both practical and philosophical from the chef, her father, André (see "Comrades in Arms," page 164).

"What my father gave me," she said, "is what you do in the small regions of France. You're responsible for the whole animal. So a good chef is not one who can cook with lobster or foie gras, but one who can take something from nature and make good things with all the parts, a huge challenge." Chefs want only the noble cuts and not the less-glamorous neck or rump, she elaborated. "At D'Artagnan, our job is to balance that, to be creative on the retail side, finding outlets for those pieces the restaurants don't want and cooking up new products that use them."

Daguin also attributes her success, and her taste for the risk judiciously taken, to the legacy of that most dashing Musketeer, D'Artagnan. "In Gascony, we all think we're descendants of D'Artagnan," she told me. "He had panache, chivalry, loyalty to king, queen, and friends. If you want to show the world you are worthy of being in it, you make your mark. When I bought out

my partner three years ago, it was a D'Artagnan thing." That partner, George Faison, had abruptly invoked the company's so-called shotgun clause, by which he would buy her out unless she found a backer to buy his share within a limited time frame.

DAGUIN SHOOK her head as she related the story, saying, "The restaurant was part of the reason why George acted," talking of the company's eponymous midtown Manhattan bistro, which opened in 2001 and closed in 2004. "I spent a lot of time and energy there for no reason—it never made money, not a dollar. He resented the fact that I didn't give my hundred percent to the wholesale business." Was she perhaps a bit blind to his needs? "To me, the restaurant was so satisfying," she replied. "In wholesale, there's always somebody between us and the consumer. It was fun to make people happy, and I was missing it." Faison, as an investor, apparently found it less so. "There were differences in style and direction with the company, and it wasn't tenable for the two of us," he said. "The fact that it did turn out the way it did was good for both of us." Just as the Musketeer D'Artagnan never shied away from a fight, so Daguin decided to answer Faison's challenge with an offer of her own. "D'Artagnan is my life," Daguin continued. "As much my baby as my child, Alix, is my baby. This is what I am."

That child, now 20 and a junior in the Cornell School of Hotel Administration, had expressed an interest in D'Artagnan, too, another reason her mother persevered, finding a sympathetic French bank and walking away as the sole proprietor.

Which brings us to the pigs. Daguin wanted to show me her vision of a sustainable and humane producer, the kind she loves working with and whose end product is highly valued. The relationship had begun in 2002, when Russ Kremer had sent her some pictures and sample cuts of the Berkshire breed. "It looked like *le cochon noir de Gascogne*, the black pig we have in the Pyrenees. The marbling was the same, very good fat. I went to visit." Here, she threw up her hands and opened her eyes wide in that Gallic expression of being completely and happily surprised.

THE NEXT DAY, we rendezvoused with Kremer at a gas station off the highway, climbing into his "farm car," a battered, baby-blue Oldsmobile, just as a warm sun came out. He was, at first glance, unremarkable—a fiftyish man of average height, medium build, brown hair going gray under a sun-bleached feed cap, the clean-cut, regular features of a middle-American farm boy. But then he began to speak. His eyes sparkled and his hands started to move, and I realized that I was in the presence of a genuine enthusiast—of farming, yes, but more importantly, of raising pigs.

Yesterday's open landscape gave way to the foothills of the Ozarks, and Kremer, who shares Daguin's love of speed, hurtled along twisting roads, following the climbing curves past isolated farms, fields, and the occasional cluster of houses. It was emerald-green countryside: lush grass blanketing the long, deep valleys; purple-blooming redbud brilliant among stands of oak and red cedar.

As he drove, Kremer explained that he had raised pigs conventionally until he was gored by a boar; the subsequent infection, resistant to antibiotics, had nearly killed him. Raising large numbers of animals in indoor confinement pens, he went on, the pigs living over grates, their feed laced with antibiotics and additives, their waste collected in fetid ponds, Kremer himself working with a syringe strapped to his belt—he thought there had to be an alternative. We rattled up the dirt drive to his farm. After stepping over a knee-high electric fence, Kremer swept an arm proudly from one end of his domain to the other. "My farm is sweet!" he said. And that it was.

The pig barn—it was open at one end, its floor covered with hay—gave on to a hillside rolling down to a valley. Beyond was a field of young wheat, almost vermilion in the sun. Inside, outside, all around us were pigs—black-spotted Berkshires, gingery Tamworths, belted Hampshires, and ruddy Durocs. The air was filled with grunts and the occasional squeal; the pigs busy, some rooting outside, some wallowing under the trees, some eating at the trough or chasing the hanging nipples that provided water.

"Natural ventilation, automatic feeding," Kremer told us. "Modern technology in a natural setting. They live over dirt. Everything about the building allows them to express themselves as they would in nature. In a year, I raise eleven hundred pigs from about sixty-five sows on a hundred and sixty acres. Some operations around here will have two thousand sows on five acres and produce ten thousand pigs per year."

Kremer and the other farmers in the co-op work in a closed, sustainable system. Today's bedding hay becomes tomorrow's compost to fertilize fields of wheat or corn, which, in turn, become animal feed. After harvest, the wheat straw and cornstalks will serve as bedding for another generation of pigs. All of this

TONY BOURDAIN, WHO NAMED HIS DAUGHTER AFTER ARIANE DAGUIN, HAS LONG RESPECTED HER AS A PIONEERING BUSINESSWOMAN. HE BELIEVES SHE IS 'THE BEST PERSON ON THE PLANET!'

takes more labor, more time, and paying more attention to both the pigs and their breeding. The farmers' reward is twofold, though: They get to feel good about what they do, and their pigs command a price premium running anywhere from 10 to 30 percent. Kremer pointed at three pigs gathered around Daguin. She was trying to take photographs of them but kept breaking into laughter as they nibbled at the cuffs of her jeans and nosed around her ankles. "These pigs would get last place in a modern hog show—they aren't Schwarzenegger pigs," he said. "When we started, people were skeptical. Berkshires grow slower; they're not as efficient to raise. It was Ariane and D'Artagnan who said, 'We're reliable customers; we'll partner!' and that gave us the confidence to expand."

Daguin guaranteed to the bank and the state—both of which were lending to the co-op—that D'Artagnan would buy up to 360 hogs a week. Though co-op deliveries have risen to 600 a week, there's never enough pure Berkshire pork to satisfy the market, cause for frequent grumbling at D'Artagnan's headquarters near the airport in Newark, New Jersey, where Daguin spends the bulk of her time and where I caught up with her just a few weeks later.

"It's nature," she said from behind her cluttered desk, a descending jet drowning the occasional word. "It's not a factory making shoes or ties." Daguin stood up and took me out back to the warehouse, a state-of-the-art meat-delivery machine running every hour of every day. Imagine a Home Depot cooled to 32 degrees Fahrenheit and filled with towering shelves stacked with thousands of boxes of meat. We moved next door, to a smaller room for mushrooms and greens. "Serbian chanterelles," she said. "Japanese *matate*, California fiddleheads, Portuguese wild asparagus, white asparagus from France." Daguin named the items she passed in one aisle.

THEN WE STOPPED at a locked cage from which emanated the unmistakable smell of black truffles. We lingered, inhaling deeply. "Everything here is three days old or less." She nodded to the meat room. "Five days old or less. We have to keep the maximum quality at all times." On the way out, we passed a room filled with expeditors, women who, as Daguin put it, "know everything about our customers. Is a restaurant open for a 5 A.M. delivery? Noon? Does the chef prefer big racks to small, butcher paper to Cryovac wrapping? What she didn't say is that she is the one who supplies all of that information, so close is she to the chefs. Tony Bourdain, an absent honoree at this year's James Beard award ceremonies, sent his friend José Andrés to accept, saying, "And thanks to Ariane Daguin, who is the best person on the planet!" Bourdain, who named his daughter after Daguin, has long respected her as a pioneering businesswoman. "She's been there with French traditional products when no one else was," he explained. "I know her to be a person of remarkable integrity."

And the future? I asked her back in her office. She settled comfortably into her chair and reflected. "I have no plans to retire. This is too much fun. I have a great team, and I don't have to do anything I don't want to do. My daughter is going to have a super-duper hard time prying me out of D'Artagnan." ■