

# Moving Forward

words by **Mallorie Boggs**

Hampshire High School's Berkshire meat research project— an opportunity created by COVID-19.



Photo courtesy of Isaac Lewis

It goes without saying that this year has been unexpected. COVID-19 has turned life as we knew it, well, to be frank, upside down. As an industry, breeders, chefs, and showmen have had to pivot, adapt, and find a way to move forward. There's a new up. For Hampshire High School, this year has been a new beginning.

Located in Romney, W. Va., Hampshire High School's (HHS) Animal and Veterinary Science Program provides students 9-12 an opportunity to learn career and industry knowledge and skills. In 2008 Isaac Lewis, agriculture science instructor and project director began the program's purebred Berkshire herd. The students are the breeders, caretakers, and showmen behind the now 7 sow herd.

On March 13, 2020, West Virginia's governor order schools to move to online learning in response to COVID-19. "When your superintendent tells you that you can't return until further notice, it makes things tough when our students are the workforce," said Isaac. "My son and I took care of everything at school during COVID".

On top of the difficulty of navigating responsibilities at school with the restrictions, shows were canceling. That's when the Berkshire Project shifted from the intentions of showing the pigs that they had, to sharpening their meat science research focus.

## WHAT'S THE CHANGE

Over the years there has been a change in pork's fat. "We know there's a change but there hasn't been research conducted to find what that change is," said Isaac. With Berkshires being known for their superior marbling, meat to fat ratio, Isaac took the pigs that were designated to show and designed a research project. "We are determined to find out how acorns (tannic acid) changes the flavor and palatability of Berkshire pork."



Photo courtesy of Isaac Lewis

Tannic acid affects the oil that is produced as the fat emulsifies in the cooking process. This change in the fat is a game-changer for the flavor of the pork.

"We want to find more ways to add value to Berkshire pork that is cost-effective for producers," said Isaac. Tannic acid can be found in acorns, apples, and grapes. HHS's research is designed to simulate the Iberico pork methods used in Spain. For cost-effectiveness, the first phase will measure the impact of acorns on Berkshire pork. HHS has a partnership with a company that rakes up acorns in Ohio and Pennsylvania. In the future, Isaac hopes to test the effects of apple cores and even storing feed in a previously used wine barrel.

## UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIPS

To make this project possible, Isaac had to connect with research partners. "I called West Virginia University (WVU) and told them what I wanted to do and wanted to find a way to test it," Isaac said. WVU submitted and was awarded a Hatch Grant to aid in funding this research. HHS and WVU have a five-year partnership for this research project.

While on a volunteer trip a few years ago with the Showpig.com All-Star Team, Isaac visited The Ohio State University's (OSU) Meat Lab. Through that trip, Isaac met Ron Cramer, manager of OSU's meat laboratory. Ron specializes in dried-artisan meats, as well as sensitivity and taste testing. Because of Isaac's contact with Ron, HHS has implemented a dry-aged test group. These pork products will be aged for 13 months.



Photo courtesy of Isaac Lewis

HHS has taken initial samples of pigs and has sent them to WVU and OSU for studies.

## MOVING FORWARD

This shift not only will allow HHS to survive in both the show and meat world, but is a one-of-a-kind learning opportunity for his students. "COVID has allowed us to realize and focus on how we truly value-add to something," Isaac said. "This pandemic has engineered this movement for us."

COVID-19 has created an opportunity to help show HHS that not every pig has to have show genetics, while at the same time as solidified Isaac and his student's passions for the Berkshire breed. This meat science project is a way for HHS to give back to the breed. Isaac said, "it's all about the nine people that you have on your baseball team. In Berkshires, we've had a lot on our starting line-up." With every day bringing new changes, Isaac's goal remains the same: To help the betterment of our industry through our kids. ◦

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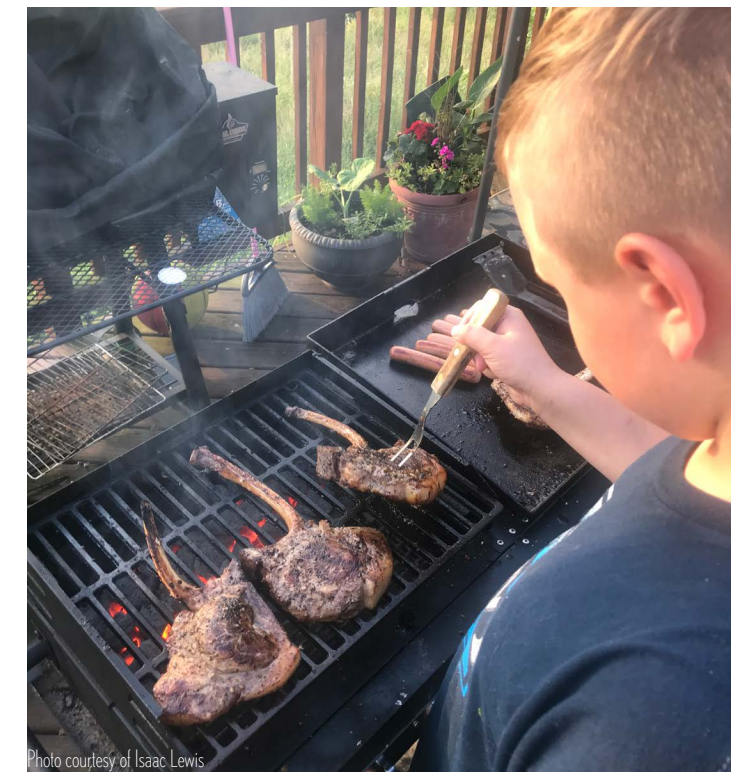


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