

Tasty versatility

Pork is a powerhouse of mouth-watering flavor

BY THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

On the heels of one of the biggest holidays where pork, as in Easter ham, is the centerpiece, there is more good news for U.S. pork producers: China is back.

The U.S. and China have reached an agreement to reopen the Chinese market to U.S. pork imports, action that could help struggling U.S. pork producers, the National Pork Producers Council announced in late March.

The Asian nation, which was the third top importer of U.S. pork in 2008, stopped imports nearly a year ago after the H1N1 flu scare, which was often called the "swine flu."

Americans, meanwhile, are in hog heaven.

"Practically every scrap of a pig can be transformed into something tasty," says Sasha Wizansky, co-editor of Meatpaper, a magazine about meat culture in America. "And you can find a treasure trove of pork-centric dishes and cured products from around the world."

It's not as if the pig suddenly arrived on the American scene. From the earliest settlements in Virginia, it's one of the oldest domesticated creatures to make its way down American gullets. But somewhere along the line, pork was cast as an also-ran, below burgers and chicken in the culinary taxonomy.

Sure, ham and ribs and Southern barbecue were continuous staples for the American stomach. But for years, many Americans rarely ventured beyond the Shake 'N Bake pork chop and its workaday suburban brethren. Even pork's longtime slogan, "The

Other White Meat," suggested a status akin to how Avis approaches Hertz.

Is that changing? Ask Michael LaScola, chef and owner of *American Seasons*, a Nantucket, Mass., restaurant where you'll find every part of a pig harvested into unusual recipes. Crispy pig ears, served up like French fries with a side of smoky ketchup? Check. Pig's head bacon served with eggs sunny side up? Check. Pork-belly fritters with foie gras? Check. And check your cholesterol while you're at it.

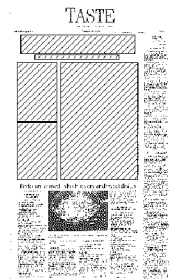
"Pork is definitely my favorite thing to play with and to cook with," says LaScola. "You can go sweet and you can go savory. And either way it works. It has a lot of flavor, but it's not gamey like lamb would be. Or, it doesn't have that super blood iron kind of thing like some beef."

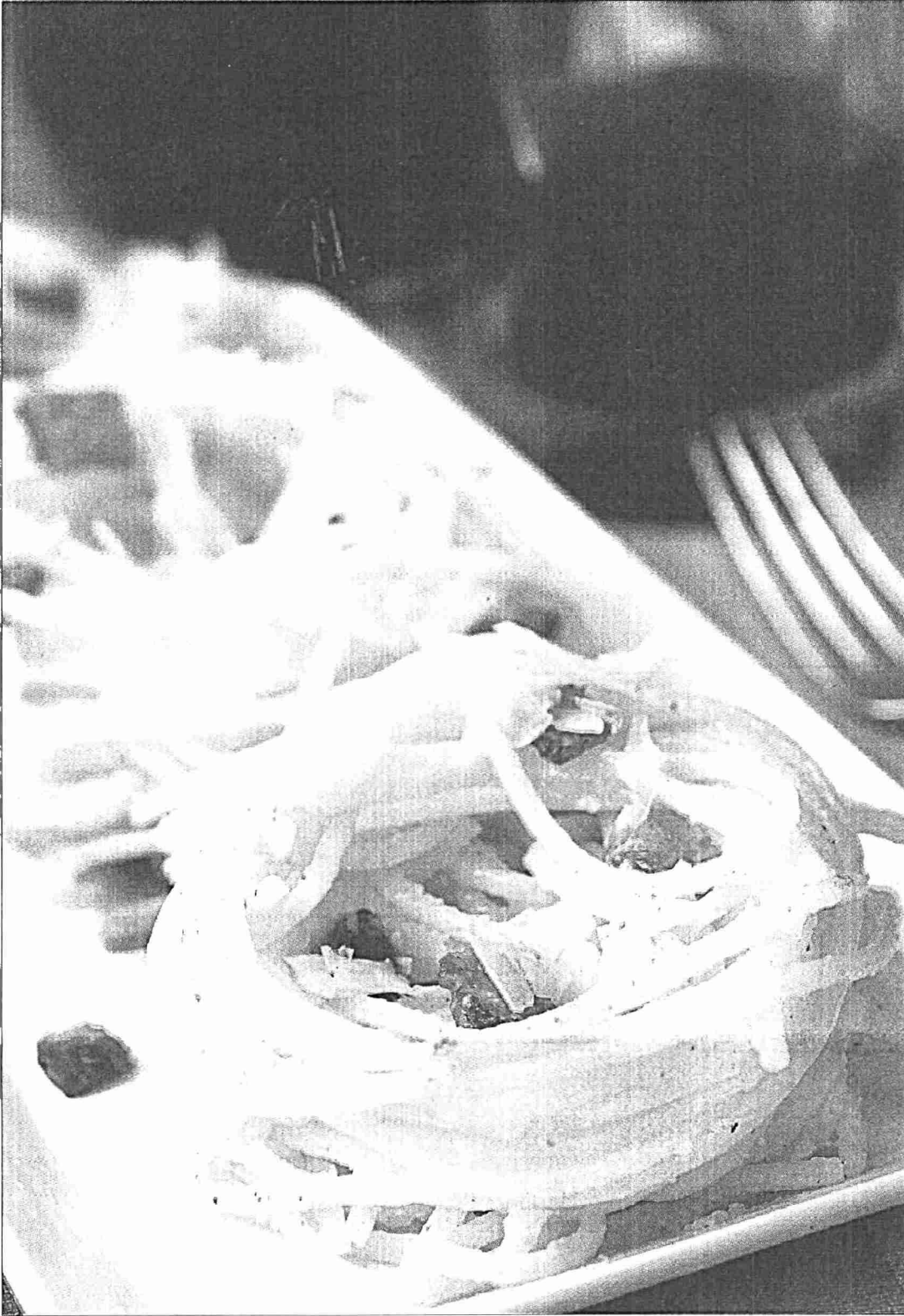
And, as meats go, most cuts of pork remain quite affordable — no small matter when you're trying to feed a family during a recession.

Then, of course, there's bacon.

From bacon-scented air fresheners to bacon-flavored mints to chocolate-covered bacon. You can even join the "Bacon of the Month" club.

Bacon seems to turn otherwise rational Americans into drooling, carnivorous maniacs. Consider food writer Joanna Pruess, rhapsodizing in the introduction to her book, "Seduced by Bacon,": "Bacon is far more than a food. It is a happy state of mind. It excites people to the point where some aficionados liken it to illicit pleasures. Can it be a religion?"





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Bacon and Parmesan cheese make this spaghetti carbonara an easy hit.