

Rich pickings from porkers

By Robert Temple

Meat that tasted as meat used to in the 18th-century can be savoured as a result of Anne Petch's Heal Farm Quality Traditional Meats. In November, 1981, Anne and her husband Richard sold 50 acres of their 80-acre farm at Umlerleigh in north-west Devon, along with all their sheep and cattle, to pay off their farm mortgage.

Then, clear of old debts, they set up a partnership and approached the local bank for an overdraft and raised £60,000 to start a new venture.

They were convinced that the public would be interested in paying slightly more for meat that "tasted like it used to" — entirely free from additives. They stocked only rare breeds of traditional pigs, such as Berkshire, Tamworth, Gloucestershire Old Spot, Middle White, and Large Black.

Some of these pigs are squat, have almost no snouts at all and are covered with long hair. Most butchers will not deal with them "because they don't fit the machines, being too short".

Today Anne and Peter have 50 sows, eight boars and between 300 and 400 young stock (for slaughtering). They



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Anne Petch and traditional roast

wean their pigs at eight weeks instead of 10 days and have only two litters a year instead of the average 2.25 litters of modern pigs. Everything for meat production is done on their farm and in their buildings, apart from the slaughtering, which is carried out by a local abattoir. The rare breeds are traditional outdoor pigs that are capable of living on a low-cost system of grass grazing and natural, additive-free feed.

The meat products cost about 20 per

cent more expensive than average meat, but Anne says the value is better because the consumer gets more meat. Her products all lack water-retainers, stabilizers, soya slurry extenders and other common additives.

Anne puts the least amount of saltpetre in her bacon of any producer in Europe, uses no other preservatives and her animals are entirely free of the hormone injections and antibiotics common in mass market meat. The garlic that flavours her sausages is from fresh cloves grown in the Isle of Wight. Her products are prepared in real brine, not artificially hastened.

Turnover for November 1981 to April 1982 was only £3,000. But from such tiny beginnings she had a turnover of £150,000 in 1985 and expects £200,000 this year. The business became profitable at the beginning of 1985, and most of it has been ploughed back into expansion.

Turnover grows at about 30 per cent a year steadily. There has been no outside finance and the ownership and directors are simply Anne and Peter. Anne runs the farm and her husband does most of the deliveries.

But Anne and Peter have no intention of taking on other people. Anne says: "The Germans have a phrase 'learning with your own money' rather than with somebody else's. It's a much better lesson."