

Bacon, pure and simple

The bacon producer Pfitscher is taking a new approach, focusing on pork that is raised without the use of antibiotics, GM feed or animal cruelty.

Antibiotics in bacon? There's really no need for it. Lukas and Michael Pfitscher grew up surrounded by meat, sausages and bacon, and their company in Burgstall is one of the largest meat processors in South Tyrol. Every week 50 employees handle around 100 tonnes of meat – in a completely conventional way.

But Pfitscher is now venturing down a new path. The company intends to focus more on pork that is raised without the use of antibiotics, GM feed or animal cruelty. The first 140 pigs that meet these criteria were slaughtered in August. 'Our aim is to process 140 pigs per month, initially,' says Lukas Pfitscher. If the new approach is popular with consumers, he would like to increase it to 140 per week. That would mean that 14 of the 100 tonnes of meat would be 'pure' – i.e., raised without the use of antibiotics, GM feed or animal cruelty.

The Pfitscher family's idea was not just based on this magazine's report on antibiotics in meat (pp. 38–39/2016). Lukas Pfitscher explains that he has travelled all over the world and seen a lot, so he is aware that there is more than one way of doing things.

He says that in the USA a lot of meat counters carry signs reading 'no drugs' and 'no cruelty'. But how can farmers guarantee something like that? Lukas Pfitscher, 33 years old and sporting horn-rimmed glasses and a trendy beard, is not the type to give up easily. Outside his office is a large sign that reads, 'There are always more solutions than problems!' This solution came in the form of a phone call from Belluno. On the other end of the line was Attilio Gorza, a pig farmer. Gorza asked Pfitscher whether he would be interested in taking part in an interesting project. Gorza had also had enough of pigs having their teeth filed down and their tails cut off after birth. In 'normal' factory farming they are then castrated – without any anaesthetic – and must reach the slaughter weight within five months, while being kept in very cramped conditions.

Lukas Pfitscher says that Gorza's pens have more space, which means that the pigs are more comfortable, do not injure themselves as easily and do not become ill as quickly. For that reason, there is no need for antibiotics. If an animal does fall ill, it is separated from the others.

Gorza gives his pigs GM-free, organic feed, and does not have their teeth or tails cut or have them castrated. However, people shouldn't imagine three pigs frolicking in a meadow either, says Lukas Pfitscher. It would be wrong to picture a rural idyll. If 140 pigs are to be slaughtered every week, the pens have to be of a certain size. But it is a 'sensible compromise,' he explains.

The 'pure' products are distributed under the brand-name Senza and cost around 50 per cent more than their conventionally produced equivalents. And do they taste better? 'That remains to be seen,' says Lukas Pfitscher. For him, the added value lies in improving the well-being of animals and people.

After all, the widespread use of antibiotics in animal feed also affects humans, with cases of antibiotic resistance becoming increasingly common. That means that more people are dying because, in some cases, antibiotics are no longer effective in treating sepsis (also referred to as blood poisoning or septicaemia) or cystitis.

'Now,' says Lukas Pfitscher, 'it's up to the customers.' Because they are the ones who have the final say about whether a product can survive in the market – or not.