

# Saving the pigs: Swabian breed rebounds from brink of extinction

By [Julie Buntjer](#) on Aug 2, 2017 at 8:30 a.m.

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WOLPERTSHAUSEN, Germany — Seen as an example of farmer's resistance, the Schwäbisch Hällischen Landschwein pig has been resurrected from the brink of extinction in southern Germany, thanks to the efforts of Rudolf Bühler, a farmer and leader of the Schwäbisch Hällischen pig breeders association.

A saddleback breed with the same coloring as the Hampshire pigs grown in the U.S., the Swabian pig is the oldest and most traditional breed remaining in Germany. It was first established around 1820 after being imported from China, and was officially recognized as the Swabian Hall pig in 1844. Prior to its arrival, the region was home only to wild pigs herded through forests by farmers.

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At one point, Bühler said more than 90 percent of the local pigs were of the Swabian breed. Then, the so-called Green Revolution arrived. It was a period in which farmers were encouraged to use pesticides, fertilizers and adopt a modern approach to farming. It resulted in the extinction of 12 of the 15 indigenous pig breeds in Germany.

“They just disappeared within just a short period of 20 years — from the 1960s to the 1980s,” Bühler said. “A large range of biodiversity just disappeared due to the so-called modern approach to agriculture.”

In place of the indigenous breeds, hybrids were introduced in Germany — pigs that grew faster, had leaner meat and a higher percentage of meat per carcass.

Bühler, representing the 14th generation to farm on the family’s land in Schwäbisch Hall, spent six years in overseas service in Asia and Africa when the swine industry in his homeland went through its rapid change. By the time he returned to Germany in 1983, journals had listed the Swabian pig extinct.

“I came back ... and found our lovely old pigs were gone,” Bühler said.

With his international work in rural development, Bühler knew the importance of indigenous breeds to the region. Unlike the mainstream breeds, which he said demand antibiotics and highly digestible foods, the indigenous breeds were adapted to the local region and free-range.

“They convert grass and alfalfa into valuable meat and protein,” he added.

With Bühler’s leadership, all of the remaining Swabian pigs were gathered — they found 20 scattered about at small-scale farms across southwest Germany — and on Jan. 11, 1984, a new herd book was created with seven sows.

“It was really the first time that an extinct breed was newly taken up,” Bühler said.

The German government sent a team to meet with him about the pig breed, and it was educated by Bühler on the importance of the old pig breeds and agrobiodiversity. Bühler said the meeting symbolized farmer resistance against mainstream agriculture.

Touted as a GMO-free region, the German farmers want seeds and breeds that belong to the farmers, not the multi-nationals, Bühler said, adding that a United Nations declaration was recently made to state just that.

“One of our claims or demands is free access to the natural potentials,” Bühler said. “Seeds and breeds are developed from us farmers over generations — over hundreds and thousands of years — and are being domesticated from our farming families.”

#### Building a market

While working to bring the Swabian pig back from the brink of extinction, Bühler said there was also a need to redevelop a market for the breed. People said the Swabian pig was old-fashioned and not as lean as the hybrid pigs.

Bühler didn’t let the comments deter him and, in 1986, a pig breeder’s association was developed. Two years later, a marketing program was launched, with sales of pork products from the Swabian pig geared to restaurants, delicatessens and hotels.

The breed association invested in its own slaughterhouse in Schwäbisch Hall, and processes approximately 180,000 head of swine per year — 100,000 of which are the Swabian pig. Those who raise the special pigs,

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currently 350 farmers in the region, must abide by strict quality standards. Those standards include refusal to use antibiotics and feed containing genetically modified organisms (GMOs), as well as abiding by animal welfare requirements.

“With these standards, we’re marketing (the Swabian pig as) an outstanding, new premium product,” Bühler said. “Now we are the leader in premium production. Our brand is well known.

Our farmers are getting the best prices ever.”

Producers of the Swabian pig are in different tiers. The top level includes pigs grown outdoors on pasture and free-range; the second is in-house produced pigs with access to fresh air, straw bedding and double-spaced pens.

Last week, the price paid for commercially raised pigs in Schwäbisch Hall was \$1.60 per kilogram dressed, while farmers growing second-tier Swabian pigs were getting \$2.25 per kilogram. Free-range Swabian pigs were selling for \$3.50 per kilogram and the top-tier organically grown pigs were netting \$4.20 per kilogram, Bühler said.

Pork is marketed directly to butchers and hotels, cutting out any intermediate agents, he added.

“There’s an awareness of good food — a strong awareness about food products,” Bühler said. “(Customers) are willing to give the correct price. In purchasing our products, the consumers assist this way of agriculture — medium-sized farmers, the culture and farming families. That’s very important to us.”

#### Industry promoter

The farm on which Bühler lives was settled by his family in 1378. After he completed his schooling, he went through vocational training as a farmer and then went on to earn a degree in agriculture engineering. He worked in world sociology in the United Kingdom and studied tropical agriculture. He worked in Africa and Asia as an agricultural expert in rural development, spending time in Zambia, Syria and Bangladesh.

“Then I came back to take over the farm since I was the only son,” he shared. “It was important as a service to my family and also to the local society.”

Bühler’s office is filled with Swabian pigs — the decorative kind that includes soft plush pigs and collectibles. His favorite cut from the Swabian pig is the cutlet “kotelett,” which is formed on the bone and fried either with or without a coating. The perfect accompaniment is kartoffelsalat (potato salad).

#### Julie Buntjer

Julie Buntjer joined the Globe newsroom in December 2003, after working more than nine years for weekly newspapers. A native of Worthington, she has a bachelor’s degree in agriculture journalism. Find more of her stories of farm life, family and various other tidbits at [farmbleat.areavoices.com](http://farmbleat.areavoices.com).



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