



The Lost Art of Meatsmithing

Oklahoman Offers Courses in Traditional Butchery

By Kara Storey

Photo by Andrew Plotsky

Brandon Sheard kneels next to his pig. He's just shot it, anticipating the nourishment the animal will provide for his family's table. But first, he solemnly places his hand on the pig and offers a benediction: Bless us O Lord, and these thy gifts, which we are about to receive, from thy bounty through Christ Our Lord. Amen.

Sheard, 40, said it's the perfect prayer following an animal kill because it orders humans to the animal's final end, which is that it exists as a gift for humanity.

"This is a paradox of slaughtering your own animals," he said. "You go through all this work—we're going to raise the pig, kill it, scald it, scrape it, gut it, split it, cut it, cure it, package it, and prepare it. It's a lot of work. But at the end of that, it is somehow more apparent that it's a gift, even though it's the result of all your labor."

Sheard calls himself a "meatsmith," which according to his website is "one who deals with all matters pertaining to the alchemy by which animals are turned into food." This includes: slaugh-

ter, butchery, charcuterie, husbandry, knife sharpening, literacy, sensibility, patience, and fine raiment. He and his wife, Lauren, along with their nine children, own and operate Farmstead Meatsmith, a small business they founded in 2010 that offers in-person, hands-on workshops that guide others through the traditional process of killing and butchering farm animals. It also offers online memberships that include video resources, forums, and live-chats pertaining to being a meatsmith. The last facet of the business is a mobile slaughter



Photo by Lauren Sheard

truck for Sheard to travel to local farms within a two-hour radius to provide his slaughter and butcher services.

“It really began as part of my revelation that I could produce, grow, kill, cut, and cure my own food to such a good effect that it was extremely delicious and nutritious, and I just didn’t want to go back,” said Sheard, who converted to Catholicism about the same time he started his business. “And so Farmstead Meatsmith is the business that we started as an excuse to enable me to keep doing that.”

While Sheard sometimes gives meatsmith workshops at out-of-state conferences and farms, most of his classes occur at his 10-acre farm in northeastern Oklahoma, which he and his family moved to from Vashon Island, Washington, two-and-a-half years ago. Classes are capped at eight students and last two to three days, depending on the animal being harvested—he provides coaching in the butchering of pigs, cows, lamb (the method also applies to goats and deer), geese, and sometimes rabbits. Sheard estimates that he hosts 11 to 13 classes a year, which is contingent upon how much “curriculum” he’s able to raise.



Photo by Lauren Sheard

Under Sheard’s tutelage, students learn the traditional method of slaughter and butchery, meaning that not only is the process respectful of the animal in how it’s killed, but also that no part of the animal goes to waste — the hanging weight of the animal equals 100% yield. The process is also ordered to family life, taking into consideration how the animal will provide best nourishment to the husband, wife, and children who will consume it. Sheard said it tastes better, too.

“Our classes are unique in that I am crazy enough to put knives in the hands of complete novices,” Sheard said, adding that people love it because “we tell the complete story from the living animal all the way to the preparation in the kitchen and the preservation. And it’s hard to find that whole narrative.”

The Family Pig

It’s 9 a.m. as Sheard escorts his students to the pasture. They’ve arrived for the three-day “The Family Pig” course. Sheard’s first order of business is to teach them how to properly shoot a pig and drain the blood to be saved for blood sausage. He intentionally goes slow, knowing that everyone is a beginner. Instead of skinning

the pig, Sheard shows participants how to scald and scrape the skin, which increases yield and allows them to make all the European peasant-style preserved meats, such as salami, prosciutto, and bacon, he said.

Day two focuses on butchering the pig. “We cut the pig in such a way that it fits the pot, the pan, and the oven,” he said. “The thing about butchery is that the thing is not about butchery, it’s about cooking. It serves the kitchen.”

The final day is all about learning how to preserve the meat using the pre-refrigeration method, allowing it to “keep until the Apocalypse, or it is eaten, whichever comes first,” Sheard said. The bacon and ham are salted. Blood sausage and pâté are made. Cookware stays hot, as participants practice cooking their fare.

Farmstead Meatsmith’s classes have been wildly popular. Sheard estimates he’s taught over 1,000 students who have come from every state in America, as well as from Canada, England, Austria, and Australia. Some participants take a course planning to butcher their own animals in a couple weeks, others want to learn in preparation for moving to the land, and others are just curious about the process.

"I think people are definitely hungry to see the process behind the meat, to understand it as not just a commodity, but as something that is part of an order of nature, and that is harvested artfully, and that can enrich their lives, and enrich the family table," he said.

Each day of class also closes with a large feast, where students are able to eat the fruits of their labor and enjoy camaraderie. Cost to attend ranges from about \$1,000-\$1,600, depending on the animal. Food is included, but students must find their own lodging. At the end of the course, all participants bring home several pounds of fresh meat.

Learning Along the Way

Sheard's first experience of slaughtering and butchering animals came while working at a small European-style farm in Washington state. When it was time to harvest a pig, a coworker handed Sheard a rifle and said, "I don't know how to do this."

Sheard didn't either, but he was willing to learn. Not only did he kill that pig that day, but he said he experienced an "epiphany" once he tasted its traditionally cured bacon.

He decided to work backwards in pursuit of meatsmithing knowledge, starting with the final cause of animal harvesting: cooking. Sheard learned how to braise, pan fry, and roast. Then came the research. Thanks to a graduate degree in English Renaissance Literature, Sheard joked that the only skill he already had was knowing how to scour books for information.

"I tried to find out how things were done on the home scale before the modern era," he said. "It was really just having trust in

the traditions that I found, that in spite of the fact that they look a little sketchy to a modern perspective, this is the data of history. This is the 'democracy of the dead,' like Chesterton says. This is how they did it for millennia."



Photo by Andrew Plotsky

Liturgical Living

Through his research he also discovered that all harvesting and food-making in pre-modern times was ordered by the liturgical year. For example, pigs weren't harvested on "November 30th" but on the "Feast of St. Andrew."

"It's actually impossible to excavate and find pre-modern recipes without finding all the liturgical influence" Sheard said. "It's just inscribed in the whole thing. For all of our European ancestors, all of life was ordered by the liturgical year—by the fasts, especially, which inform and lead to the feasts in a more ordered way."

Sheard has revived this liturgical connection in his own business by holding a "Martinmas

Goose Harvest" class around November 11, the Feast of St. Martin. Traditionally, this was the time that slaughtering would start to occur in the northern hemisphere, as temperatures began to get colder, he said.

Because of the intimate connection between animal harvesting and the liturgical calendar, Sheard said, it's impossible for him to teach the traditional method absent his faith. So during courses he prays and blesses the meals, and is open to answering any questions his students have about Catholicism.

"We find students have lots of openness and just real earnest, honest questions, like 'What's the rosary? What's that prayer that you say after you kill a pig?'" he said. "And there's no undercurrent of cynicism or wanting to argue at all. They really just want to know."

To Sheard, teaching others how to kill, butcher, cut, and cook their meat is important because it forms people in the virtues they need for spiritual maturity, he said. Ultimately, passing on the skills of meatsmithing has eternal consequences.

"God is the author, He's the creator," he said. "And so the farmer, in a very particular way, becomes an instrumental cause of the continued creation of God by tapping into the capacity that the land has to produce food for the end, not for the end of just preserving the land in perpetuity, but for the end of feeding immortal souls so that they can go to heaven, so that they can live virtuously and go to Mass."

For more information about how to sign up for a Farmstead Meatsmith class, or become a member, please visit farmstead-meatsmith.com.