

The benefits of producing your own meat have been highlighted by the scandal of horsemeat in cheap processed food. You could even learn butchery skills, as Stuart Anderson explains

With all the recent media horseplay about value burgers, smallholders have even more reason to feel good that the food on their plates could be labelled 'born here, raised here, butchered here and consumed here'. It is always a pleasure when we sit down to eat and realise that most or all that is on the plate in front of us is food that we've raised and cultivated. There are a few stages between the field and the dinner table and one of those is butchery, a very satisfying skill to pick up.

Two halves of a pig or a whole lamb returning from the abattoir need some basic savoir-faire and a few tools (see box) to portion them up for the freezer. This is a manageable task that becomes more enjoyable as you master it. You have nothing to lose: if your chop doesn't make the grade, it can go into a stew!

## Good practice

If you are processing meat returning from the abattoir for sale, you are actually operating as a butcher's shop, so you should contact your local authority (food safety team) for advice; it is they who control and enforce this final part of the operation. There is no regulation if you're butchering meat for your own consumption but, in both cases, food safety is paramount. Our workshop (see photos) might not have the white tiling and stainless steel of a regular butcher's but our work surfaces, hands, knives and aprons are clean and we're very careful how we handle the meat. The following link from the Food Standards Agency website advises on good practice and what the legal requirements are [www.food.gov.uk/business-industry/butchers/](http://www.food.gov.uk/business-industry/butchers/)

## SHARPEN YOUR KNIVES

My first attempts at butchery were with an expert in Brittany, where I live. Short and slight, with the air of a village parson, Bernard is now 'retired' from the job he's been doing since he was 14, but still works occasionally as a *boucher de campagne* (a 'countryside butcher' who travels around to ply his trade). He's willing to teach me but does things at such a speed that I don't always catch it.

Bernard highlighted points of reference, such as counting ribs, to make the cuts, and I watched attentively, made notes, took photos and short videos. There's no substitute for experience, though, and only more practice makes perfect. Bernard recounted how,



# DIY butchery

as a young apprentice himself, on quiet afternoons, his patron (boss) would take a pencil-thick piece of wood and draw marks on it for Bernard to practice his skills with the cleaver. Hitting exactly the same point with the second swing makes for a nicer looking chop.

There was potential for a little confusion as the French divide a pig differently to the English—the Americans also have their own way—and I needed to keep my wits about me (with crackling in mind) to stop Bernard removing the skin from roasting joints

## FLYING SOLO

The next stage in my education was to tackle a pig myself. The River Cottage *Pig in a Day*

DVD has been invaluable. With half a pig laid out in front of me, boning knife in hand, I had a friend play Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall's DVD on his laptop and relaying instructions. "Put two fingers next to the leg bone," my friend calls out, "make a mark, then cut through to the bone with the steak knife." The DVD gets stopped, started, rewound, replayed and, every now and again, I have to go and look at the screen because I can't quite understand the called-out instructions.

To begin with, you'll learn to use the knives for cutting meat and to stop when you encounter bone, changing to the saw or cleaver, then back to the knife once clear; and don't forget to whet the knife blades on



**Left, above & top middle: French 'countryside butcher' Bernard at work**  
**Top right: Stuart Anderson gets down to some serious butchery**  
**Right: Northampton butcher John Sargeant – a natural teacher**  
**Far right: Bernard shows how it is done**

### THE KIT

Your essential kit will include a curved boning knife, a steak knife, a cleaver and a steel to sharpen them all on, plus a butcher's saw and an apron. Good kit won't set you back too much; search for 'butcher's supplies' online. You'll also need a suitable clean work surface and a robust wooden chopping board.

the steel, from time to time. You'll get the hang of feeling around a bone with the tip of the boning knife. At first, you'll be diving into the unknown but, once you've seen what the bone you're trying to remove looks like, you'll make a neater job of it next time. As your lesson in physiology continues, you'll appreciate the subtleties of different muscle groups and learn how to follow down the white line of membrane with the tip of your knife to divide the leg, for example.

There is a lot of useful material available for free on the internet, including instructions, diagrams and photos. Even more useful, there are plenty of videos: a good example is New York chef Chris Consentino showing how to butcher a pig's head (an awkward thing to deal with) to make an Italian salami called porchetta di testa.) Your skill will snowball the more you tackle. I still have Bernard back to help when we have two pigs to deal with and learn a new trick each time.

### AD HOC COURSE

I recently popped over the Channel to see my mum in Northampton and took the opportunity to visit her local butcher for a

short but comprehensive apprenticeship on how to cut up a lamb. John Sargeant ([www.sargeantsofnorthampton.co.uk/](http://www.sargeantsofnorthampton.co.uk/)) is a natural teacher and was proud to share his skills; he could walk into a technical college tomorrow, if he fancied a change of job.

We walked through the chain curtain and out back, where John equipped me with clean white smock and apron. A thorough wash of my hands and we were ready. Straight away, I could see that John was making some of his cuts differently to how I'm used to doing it. He left five ribs on the neck (as opposed to three) and the shoulder, as he cut it, had more meat on it and looked better presented. It wasn't long before he handed me the knife. Very trusting, as all the meat was going straight into the shop for sale.

Not being a complete beginner, I didn't make a fool of myself and felt particularly proud when I plunged the knife in to separate hock from leg and got the joint first time. It was a really valuable experience, I learned loads and I'm very grateful to John for being so generous with his time.

### WHOLE SOME ALTERNATIVES TO CHEAP PROCESSED FOOD

One aspect of the crisis around the fraudulent labelling of meaty goo is allegedly the need to provide affordable food for struggling families. Smallholders will know that there are tasty, healthy alternatives to buying 'value' processed food of unfathomable provenance. The answer is to go for cheaper cuts of meat and learn how to cook them well. As we're butchering the whole animal for our consumption, we must

### HOME SLAUGHTER

If you want to sell your meat, then it's off to a licensed abattoir but, if it's for your own consumption, you might consider home slaughter. *Country Smallholding* regular Tim Tyne has written an excellent article about home slaughter, available here [www.countrysmallholding.com/index-of-articles-sheep-killing-and-butchering-sheep-212299](http://www.countrysmallholding.com/index-of-articles-sheep-killing-and-butchering-sheep-212299) Tim mentions relevant aspects of the law; for more information the Food Standards Agency has a webpage 'Home slaughter of livestock: A guide to the law' where what can and cannot be done is detailed: [www.food.gov.uk/business-industry/guidancenotes/meatregsguid/home-slaughter-livestock/](http://www.food.gov.uk/business-industry/guidancenotes/meatregsguid/home-slaughter-livestock/)

make the most of all of it. Food for the poor? You'll find pigs' trotters à la Sainte Menehould on the menu of high-class Paris restaurants: French peasant food for the noblesse.

You don't even need a smallholding or stock to get started, as a family butcher like John would be very happy to sell you half a pig or a lamb or you could go direct to a local farm. There's much to gain and nothing to lose in acquiring this manageable and enjoyable skill, as you can cook and eat your mistakes along with your successes.

### About the author

Stuart Anderson and his wife Gabrielle live on their three-acre permaculture smallholding in Brittany. They grow fruit, vegetables and firewood, raise sheep, pigs, chickens, ducks, rabbits and bees and rent out their holiday cottage. [www.permacultureinbrittany.com](http://www.permacultureinbrittany.com)