The National Pork Board hosted their 4th Annual Pork Summit, April 4 through April 6, at the Culinary Institute of America’s Greystone campus in St. Helena, CA. The by-invitation-only event brings together winners from State and Regional Taste of Elegance competitions, top chefs and foodservice trade media editors for a pork-centric educational weekend.

Stephen Gerike, Director of Foodservice Marketing for the National Pork Board, welcomed guests the evening of April 4 at the Ecolab Theatre on the Greystone campus. After introductions, Gerike and renowned chef, author and sausage maker Bruce Aidells gave a butchering demonstration. They broke down two half hogs – one fabricated the traditional domestic way, and the other in the European style. Once broken down into primals, the discussion focused on the fresh leg and the many uses for leg muscles beyond ham. In addition, Gerike butchered whole bone-in and boneless loins and discussed the new nomenclature for chops.

After the butchering demonstration, guests boarded buses to Farmstead Restaurant at Long Meadow Ranch for a welcome reception. The group enjoyed hors d’oeuvres outside as the sun was setting. Hors d’oeuvres highlights included mini “knuckle” sandwiches made with cured pork knuckle, mini La Quercia ham sandwiches with fresno pepper jelly, a pig face-shaped, pimento cheese, and a charcuterie board featuring chorizo and soppressata. As the group sampled some of Farmstead’s best starters, they watched Farmstead Executive Chef Stephen Barber and his team prepare dinner in the restaurant’s designated live fire cooking area.

Tables were set up for a family-style feast in Farmstead’s shabby-chic barn. Guests tried a Long Meadow Ranch garden salad, Cajun boudin sausage with whole grain mustard, and buttery
potato rolls with sea salt. The main courses were a whole-hog barbecue with vinegar sauce, St. Louis-style ribs, Delta asparagus with Bellwether Farms ricotta, and plancha-cooked fingerling potatoes with green garlic and spring onions. After dinner, everyone enjoyed house-made s'mores back at the live fire area before heading home happy and full.

Saturday’s events focused on education and kicked off with a Pork 101 class taught by Gerike. Attendees learned about the pork industry from farm to fork, including breeds, production, animal care, quality and meat science, and were given a pork quality demonstration and tasting. In addition to Gerike’s presentation, CIA Chef Instructor Bill Briwa taught a segment on the art and science of brining. For lunch, guests headed to the third floor teaching kitchen for Mexican street food. Expertly prepared by Chef Briwa and Chef Instructor Lars Kronmark, the lunch featured carnitas, cochinita pibil, fresh salads and salsas, and white corn tortillas being made to order.

Post-lunch activities kicked off with chef demonstrations and tastings of pork cooking methods. Chef Jose Enrique Montes of Restaurant Jose Enrique in San Juan, Puerto Rico and his former sous chef Pedro Alvarez, now a sausage maker and owner of Alcor in San Juan, discussed the technique of salt-curing shanks before refrigeration. This way of preserving meat was commonly practiced all over the world. Montes cures his shanks for four days, then rinses and hangs them in his walk-in for varying amounts of time – the flavor evolves the longer they age. For his demonstration dish, he simmered the shanks in water for five to six hours to create a beautifully unctuous stock. He added chickpeas, cabbage, Alvarez’s chorizo and potatoes. After topping with slices of the cured shank and a drizzle of olive oil, the final product was a perfectly balanced pork soup.

Next up was Chef Brad Farmerie of Public and Saxon + Parole in New York City, and The Thomas in Napa, CA. Farmerie takes whole-hog cooking seriously – he uses all parts of the pig and the by-product as well. He explained to attendees that pig blood can be a valuable ingredient in the kitchen, demonstrating how to make traditional British blood pudding. He mixed the blood with ground pork, back fat, cooked rice, cooked barley, oats, parsley, sage, thyme, oregano, allspice, paprika, fennel, coriander seeds, mustard seeds, cumin, bay leaf, Aleppo and Public’s curry sausage spice, then poured the mixture into loaf pans and baked it in a water bath. Farmerie uses blood pudding in innovative ways at his restaurants, and guests got to taste a popular Public brunch dish: black pudding waffles with red wine-poached pears and whipped foie gras butter. For the French boudin noir, he combined pig’s blood with ground
pork, panko bread crumbs, double cream, onion, garlic, duck fat, green apple, pork back fat, curry spice and Public’s Quatre Épices spice blend and stuffed it into salted hog casings that had been soaked overnight in cold water.

Chef and Salumist Tony Incontro of Del Dotto Winery in St. Helena, CA was the next demonstration chef. Incontro, one of the country’s most talked about charcuterie experts, demonstrated how to properly butcher a fresh leg for culatello and a shoulder for coppa while discussing the care and patience it takes to make world-class charcuterie. His enthusiasm was evident in his tasting plate of culatello, coppa and lardo, and attendees left thinking about giving the art of salumi a try at their own restaurants.

Lastly, Chef Jonathan Waxman of Barbuto in New York City demonstrated his California-style of cooking. Using ingredients he pulled from the school’s kitchen garden that morning, he focused on creating delicious pork dishes paired with bright vegetable preparations. One highlight was his contemporary take on Pork Milanese – a thinly pounded bone-in chop, dipped in egg wash and fresh breadcrumbs and pan fried. He served it with a fresh gem lettuce salad and a squeeze of lemon. He also made delicious stir-fried rice by adding medallions of fresh pork leg with eggs, ginger and sprouting cauliflower, and demonstrated an authentic Italian milk-braised rack of pork.

Inspired and thinking about pork in new ways, the guests made their way to the Rudd Center for Wine Studies, where brew master Jared Rouben taught a beer and pork pairing class. Rouben, a CIA Hyde Park graduate and Principal at Moody Tongue Brewery in Chicago, has devoted his career to crafting beers that are chef- and food-friendly. He shared his culinary perspective on beer and how chefs can add value to a diner’s overall experience by understanding how food and beer pair. Attendees tasted six beers – Bitburger Pils, Ballast Point Sculpin IPA, Brasserie Dupont Saison, Oskar Blues Old Chub, 1809 Berliner Style Weisse, and The Bruery Oude Tart, and tried pairing them with various flavor profiles such as salt-and-pepper chicharróns, pork rillettes, bacon toffee cracker jacks, pork pastrami, pork picadillo and shaved roast pork loin with lemon. The group left with a new appreciation of how beer can amplify the flavors of the kitchen.

After the beer pairing class, attendees exited to the Rudd Center Terrace where brothers and Chefs Robert Danhi and David Danhi were busy creating a street-food feast. At one station, Southeast Asian expert Robert crafted three innovative pork dishes: chopstick-grilled lemongrass pork with black pepper-caramel sauce, soy- and spice-simmered pork hocks with quail eggs and fermented mustard greens, and
ginger pork puffs with crunchy tofu. At the other station, David Danhi of Grilled Cheese Truck fame was serving up three different unconventional grilled cheeses: a cheesy mac-and-rib melt, a porchetta melt with Fontina, and a pork pastrami melt with blueberry-bacon jam. Rouben made sure all of these dishes were paired with the perfect beers.

On Sunday, everyone was excited to get into the kitchen. The chefs joined together in a market basket exhibition, testing all the techniques learned throughout the weekend. Teams, made up of Taste of Elegance winning chefs and foodservice media editors, were lead by Montes/Alvarez, Farmerie, Incontro, Waxman and the Danhi brothers. With three hours to cook, each team had to break down a half hog to include in their four dishes: a breakfast sandwich, a center-of-the-plate dish using fresh leg or chops, a global sandwich and a dish of their choice. The teams rose to the challenge and served some impressive food. After all the hard work in the kitchen, everyone sat down to enjoy the meal that they had all prepared during the exercise.

From butchery and blood sausage to the perfect pork-and-beer pairings, education is the goal of the Pork Summit. After a delicious weekend, chefs and editors left St. Helena feeling inspired, with a deeper understanding of pork’s versatility and a greater appreciation for its incredible flavor.