

**Danish-American connections**  
**Friendship spans the ocean**

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HOLSTERBRO, Denmark — Jude Becker and Bertel Hestbjerg are friends who visit each other's farms as often as they can, sharing ideas about pig farming. The two live on different continents 4,200 miles apart.

The connection came to light during an International Federation of Agricultural Journalists Congress tour. When Hestbjerg talked about people who inspired him, one of those was an Iowa farmer.

They were both happy to talk about their friendship and how it has been good for business.

Becker, who farms near Dyersville in eastern Iowa, and Hestbjerg, who farms in Holsterbro in western Denmark, have been sharing ideas in person and online for nearly 20 years.

Their friendship started in 2003 when Becker was part of a group of U.S. farmers, university researchers and meat scientists traveling to northern Europe to study the production of niche pork there. They stopped at Hestbjerg's farm and witnessed his piglets raised outdoors with farrowing huts in fields with poplar trees.

"I was a young man, kind of awestruck," Becker recalls.

At age 26, he was an "aspiring pork producer" who admired the "clear-headed approach" the Danish farmer had towards raising pigs.

Bertel and his wife Marianne operate Hestbjerg Økologi (Ecology), a 15-generation farm which is Denmark's largest organic pig farm.

The Danes keep excellent records and are systems-based, Becker said.

"I always try to model my farm after that," said the sixth-generation Dubuque County, Iowa, farmer. "Our family was never fond of the industrial agriculture model."

Becker developed Becker Lane Organic Farm, finding a processor and a market for his Certified Organic pork. First he visited Chicago and Minneapolis to find markets for his specialized pork. Today his biggest markets are in California, and he exports to Japan and Hong Kong.

Becker's branding influenced the Danish couple to re-think how they market their pigs.

As is standard with pork producers in Denmark, the farm initially sold to Danish Crown, a cooperative owned by 5,620 farmers with 1,500 of the farmers raising pigs and the remainder beef and dairy.

However, Hestbjerg wanted to do some of their own marketing to tell the story of how their pigs were raised. Becker's branding inspired him.

Since the pigs are raised outdoors amid poplar trees, Hestbjerg developed their Poplar Pigs (Poppelgris) brand. They asked Danish Crown, one of the largest meat processors in Europe, for permission to do their own branding and marketing for a portion of their pigs. The company said it was all or nothing, Hestbjerg said.

After a few more tries, the couple decided it was nothing and went with their own branding, marketing and processing system.

“I thought, ‘that’s a big risk,’” Becker said of learning about his friend’s choice.

It turned out to be a risk worth taking.

In 2017 they went solo with the Popplegris brand. The brand guarantees going well beyond approved animal welfare and ecological requirements in Denmark. It tells their story of raising pigs in farrowing paddocks featuring insulated huts for comfort during all seasons in Denmark. They sell their brand to supermarkets and to a Danish company selling to butchers and restaurants.

The Denmark-U.S. connection stays strong. Hestbjerg last visited Becker in 2019 when he was a guest speaker at an organic conference before the pandemic, and Becker’s most recent visit was earlier in February.