Pink Gold

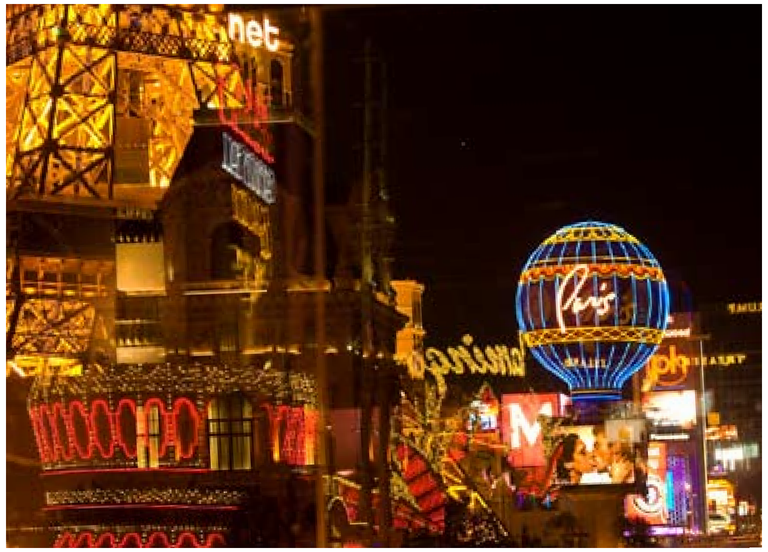
BOB COMBS' PIG FARM INSPIRES LOVE AND LUST IN LAS VEGAS.

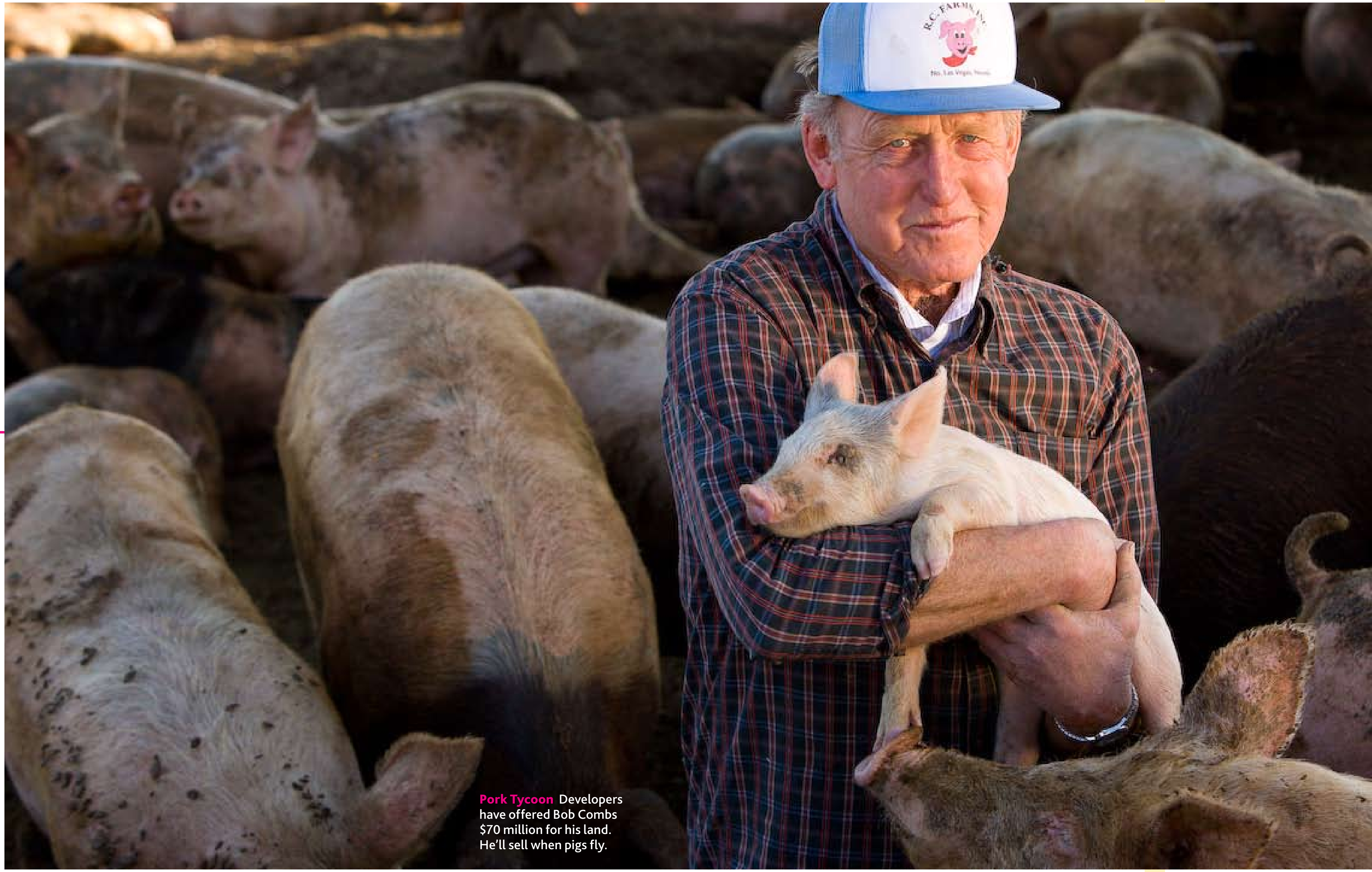
BY KATE SILVER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TYLER STABLEFORD

A SECRET CULINARY CLUB lurks in Las Vegas. Every day, competing restaurants on the famous Strip come together for a meal. From Charlie Palmer Steak at the Four Seasons to Cravings Buffet at the Mirage, and from Toby Keith's I Love This Bar and Grill at Harrah's to Michael Mina at Bellagio, dozens participate in this daily breaking of bread.

And boy, what bread. Crusty loaves from MGM Grand could fill a truck, and crab legs dance on their spindly points. The wafting smell of beef curls into a come-hither finger, drawing diners' noses to the air. There's an eclectic buffet-style array of mashed potatoes, sushi, and sausage patties, and a fresh spread of fruits and vegetables. Weighing in at thousands of pounds, the feast could feed an army. And it does: about 4,000 watering mouths in all.





Pork Tycoon Developers have offered Bob Combs $70 million for his land. He'll sell when pigs fly.

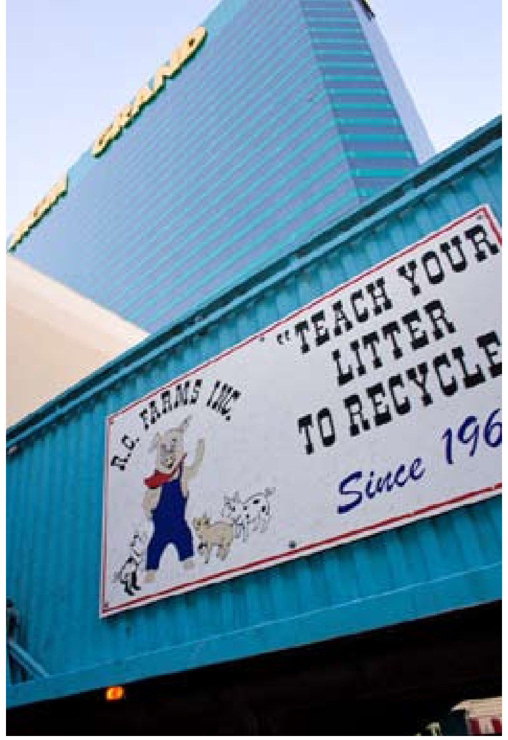
The diners aren't exactly patient in this establishment. They climb over one another, rooting to get a better position for the All-Strip Buffet. The grunting and snorting outweighs any hope for an intelligent conversation.

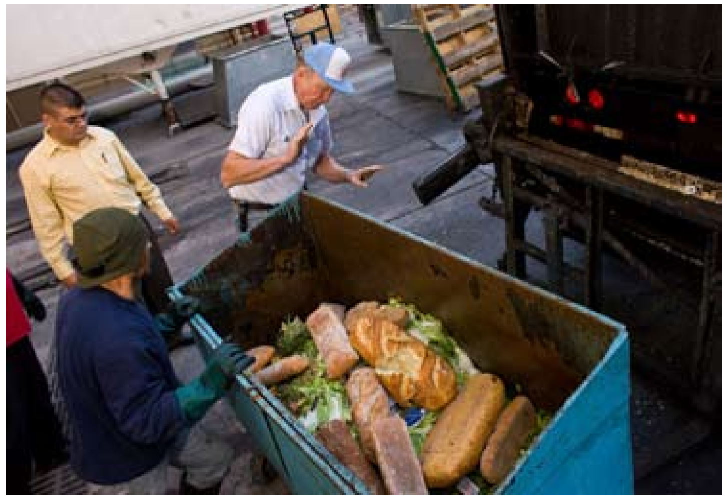
"*La musica*, huh?" Bob Combs asks his headwaiter.

"*Sí*!" responds the man, delivering the steaming bouillabaisse by the shovelful onto the waiting buffet.

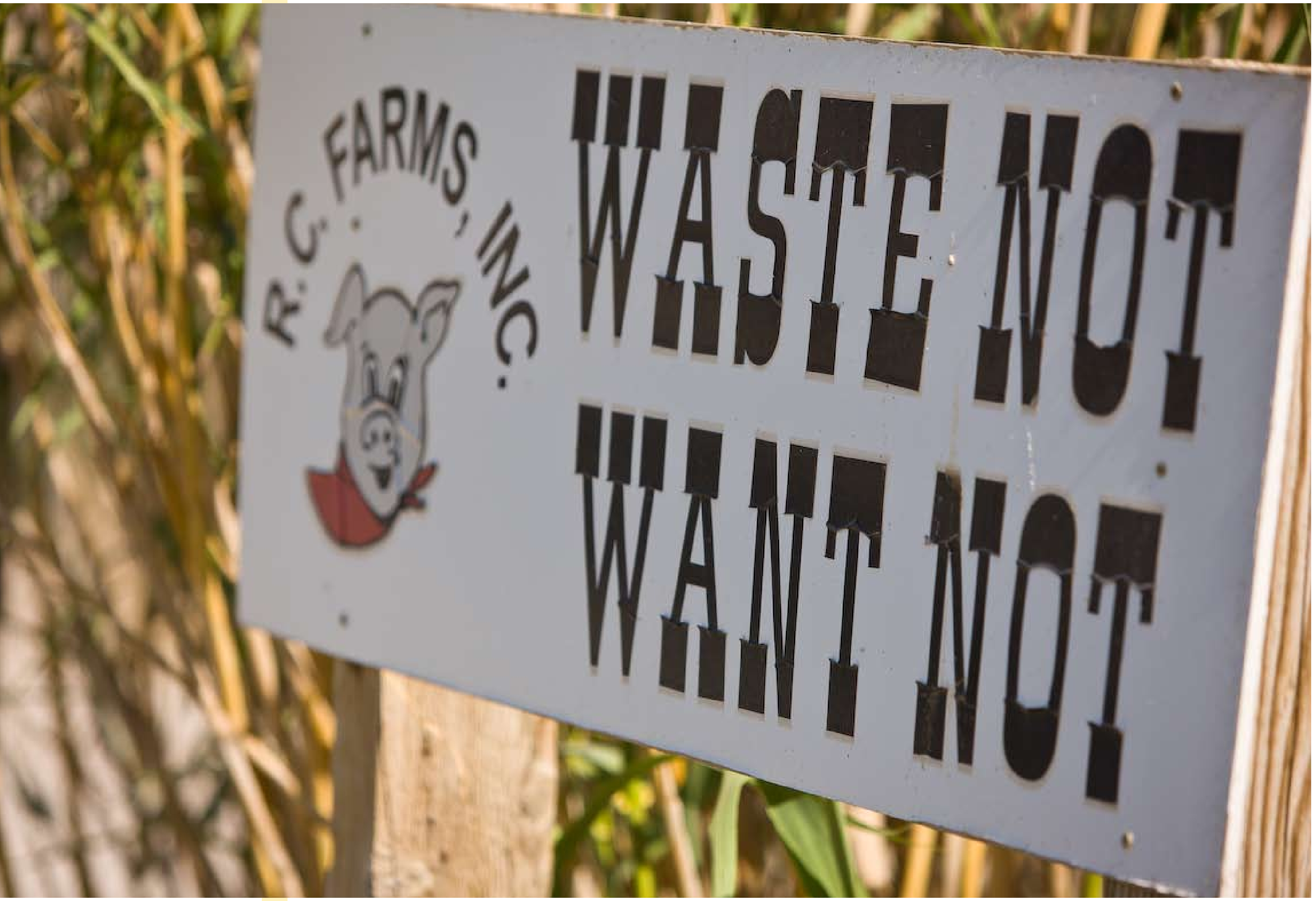
Clearly, this isn't the kind of buffet for which guests stand in line at Bellagio. That's because the drooling diners are actually hogs at R.C. Farms, a pig farm in North Las Vegas. As their waiter—actually, a farmhand—makes his way down a galley of 10 pens, the pigs' enthusiasm grows for the five-star slop. Its smell is reminiscent of chili, and the brown stewed chunks land on the pigs' heads, only to be licked off by other hogs. The squealing symphony means the pigs have an appetite and are in good health. That's why, to the 69-year-old Combs, it is music.

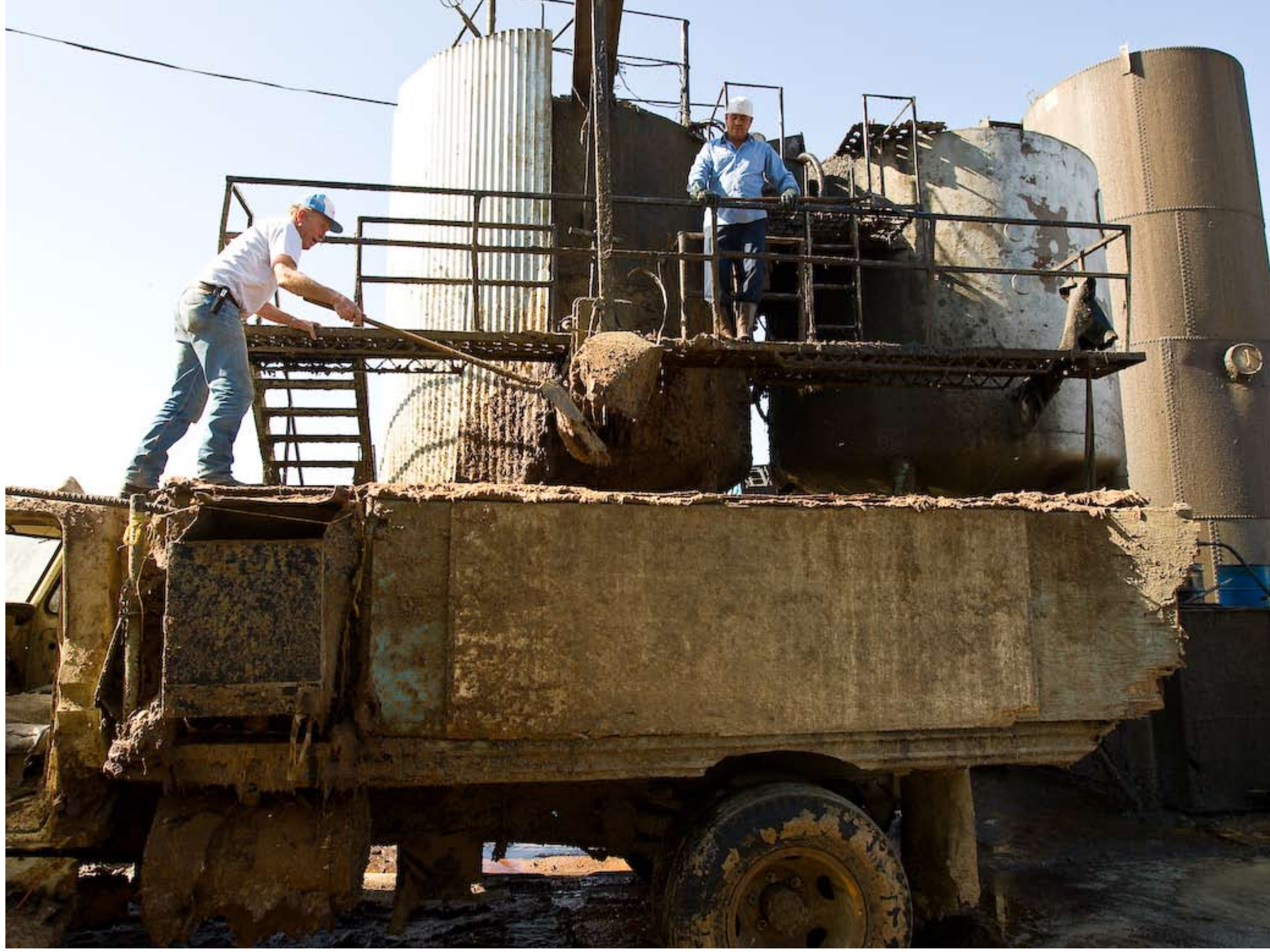
The rich, muddy stream of nutrients is bubbling crude for this establishment. When Combs lists the hotels and casinos he deals with—Bellagio, MGM Grand, Four Seasons, Mirage, Harrah's (which he pronounces "hurrahs"), Planet Hollywood, New York-New York, Golden Nugget, and so on—he's also listing the power players on Las Vegas Boulevard. But this entrepreneur camouflages his business side. He wears a plaid farmer's shirt and jeans, and laughs like a goofball at his own jokes. He drives his pickup truck—one of the few new-looking things he owns—past the casinos at about 20 miles an hour slower than the speed limit. When he walks into one of the massive kitchens of MGM Grand and warmly waves toward the blank stares of the employees, he's like a dollop of Mayberry in the big city. Of





Extra Helpings Three percent of Vegas' solid waste, including those casino buffets, goes into R.C. Farms dumpsters.





Sloppy Joes Combs and a farmhand feed food into Combs' handmade slop converter.

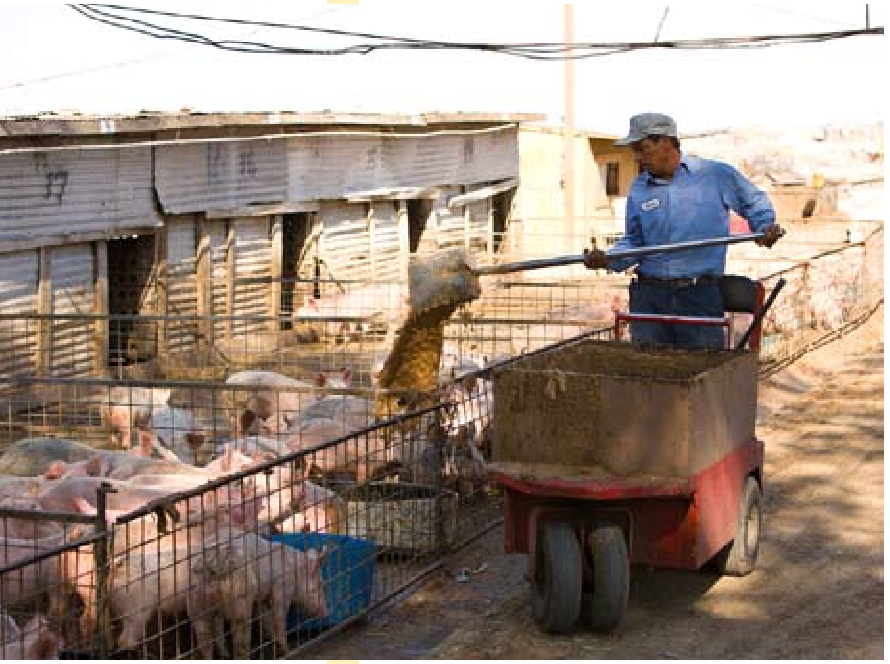
course, Combs and Las Vegas were once small-town at the same time. One's changed, while the other just keeps on farming pigs, spinning the leftovers of Las Vegas Boulevard into gold.

Combs surpassed his 15 minutes years ago. The hit TV show *Dirty Jobs* featured him—viewers voted R.C. Farms their favorite episode of the year—and so did *America's Heartland*. The Associated Press visits the farm from time to time. Between Combs' easy laugh and fish-out-of-water business, it's no wonder the media returns.

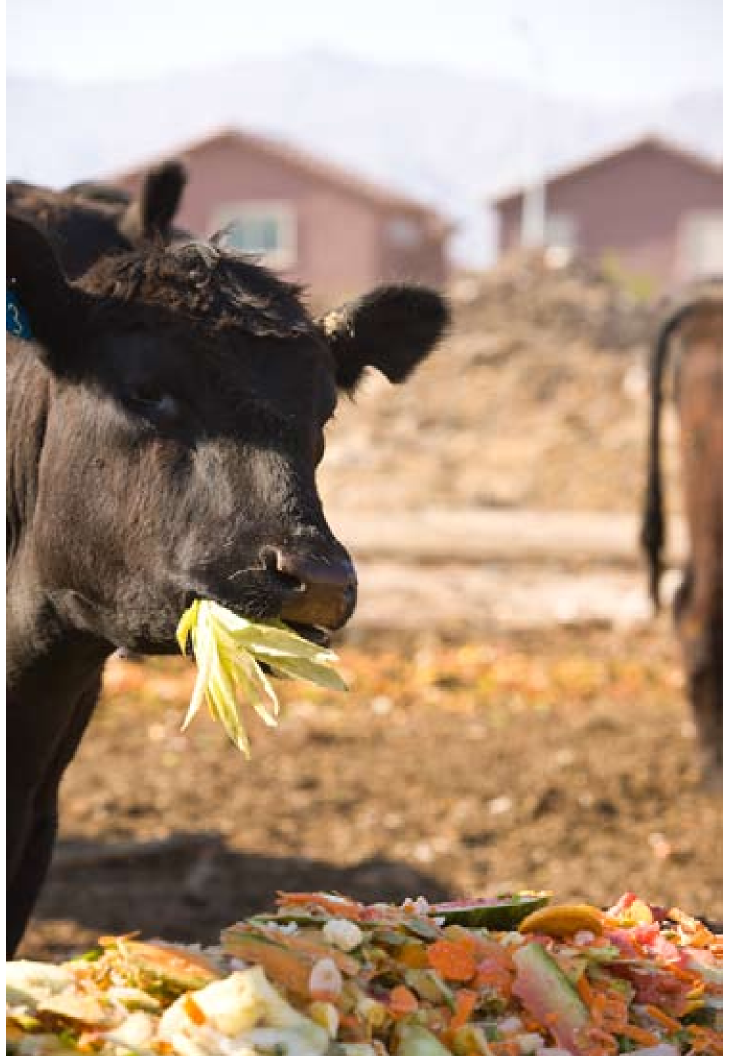
Although you wouldn't know it to look at Combs' farm, and while he'd be the last to admit it, he's the richest pig farmer in Nevada, at least on paper. And his wealth comes from more than for his thousands of swine and hundreds of cattle, goats, and sheep. He owns 100-plus acres of land in a town that consistently tops the list of fastest growing cities in the country. But he's not in it for the money.

NEARLY 40 MILLION PEOPLE visited Las Vegas in 2007. On average, each one left behind a pound of leftovers every day. While the Clark County health code allows unopened food to go to charities, opened food must be thrown away or converted into slop. That's Combs' cue. In 2006 (the latest data available), Clark County recycled more than 470,000 tons of solid waste. R.C. Farms handled nearly 3 percent of the total. Combs' farm's intake of 1,000 tons of food per month constitutes scarcely a drop in the proverbial Dumpster.

The process of transporting the casinos' buffet gravy and half-eaten chateaubriand into the bellies of pigs miles away functions like a well-oiled slot machine. As the city's resident waste expert, he helped architects design the MGM Grand's recycling dock when the resort was built in 1973. Here, every morning before sunrise, workers bring out the "wet trash," or food, in large, gray trashcans. An elevator raises and dumps the loads onto a table, where the workers sort the straws and plastic bags from the meat, vegetables, desserts, and breads. The food goes into three baby blue Dumpsters stamped with "R.C. Farms Food Scraps." Each 1,000-pound Dumpster empties into an R.C. Farms truck that heads up Las Vegas Boulevard to the next stop, before driving 13 miles north to the farm.



Chowtime Combs' pigs eat up to 30 pounds of slop a day. His cows like their food unprocessed. His nearby neighbors prefer neither.



When the grub truck arrives at R.C. Farms, it goes to an area that resembles a giant game of Mousetrap. Combs, a perpetual recycler, built the jury-rigged contraption out of used parts and scrap. "I figure the good Lord, in his plan, he made everything recyclable," Combs says. "Man just kinda messes everything up." That mess of shrimp, foie gras, and sushi pours off the truck onto conveyor belts that dump the soggy chunks into an enormous tank. Steam-cooking kills any bacteria. Oil floats to the top, creating a slick that the farm vacuums off and sells to detergent and cosmetics companies. Then the bubbling stew pours out of the tank into a waiting dump truck. A driver transports the load to another table, which mixes the stew with high-protein alfalfa and bread. Then that gets poured by the bucketful into a cart and shoveled to the pigs. They eat up to 30 pounds of this stuff a day, gaining about 260 pounds in seven months.

This casinos-to-Combs conveyor belt benefits everybody. "It's a win-win for the pig farm as well as the hotels," says Yvette Monet of MGM Mirage. "We have saved considerable costs by providing this food to the pig farm, as opposed to it going in the regular trash." No wonder others have gotten into the act. Everyone from Stop and Shop to Princeton University to the Texas Department of Prisons sends leftovers to nearby pig farms. But no pigs can possibly do as well, culinarily, as the pigs in Vegas. But some days stand out. On Valentine's Day and Christmas, the pigs can count on a nice delivery from Ethel M's Chocolates. A jack-o'-lantern diet hits right after Halloween, when area supermarkets collect carved pumpkins for R.C. Farms. The Kidd Marshmallow Factory also sweetened things up before an explosion closed the plant in 1988.

Surprises also come frequently. Combs received 15,000 pounds of weevil-infested grain from a brewery once. Rather than taking it to the landfill, where they'd have to pay to dump it, they brought it to Combs, who asked, "What would you like in return?" And the man said, 'Hey, you saved us a lot of money from the trash company. Gimme a couple of pounds of your sausage.'"

The City of Las Vegas provided another highlight in 2005, when it purchased 131,000 pounds of cake from Sara Lee to create a record-breaking cake as part of its centennial celebration. Only about one-third of the $95,000 yellow cake was eaten. The rest wound up you-know-where.

But the best time of all—tragically brief as it was—may have been when the pigs got soused. "We had a trough full of ice-cream mix, so they had a refreshing drink before they took their trip to market," Combs says. "Only problem was, it was a nice warm day. All that mix had been sitting in that truck too long, and it had fermented. So those pigs were all drunk. My son had a heck of a time loading those hogs on that truck." Combs shakes his head at the memory.

The most memorable time for Combs came in 1968, when the Circus Circus hotel and casino invited him to its opening media and VIP party. He asked if he could bring anything along.

"They said, 'Yeah, bring us down six pigs.'"

Live?

"'Yeah,' they said, 'six live pigs, near 100 pounds each.' So everybody's sitting in the show, and when I got the pigs down there, they said, 'Turn 'em lose.'" The publicity stunt worked.

"I could tell where those pigs were at in the showroom because I could hear the women scream," Combs says. "You could see the chairs moving because the pigs were taller and could move an empty chair." Reporters fed the pigs from the table. "This was the ultimate in food scrap recycling, because we brought the pigs to where it's being generated," he laughs. Combs neglects to say if Circus Circus served pork.

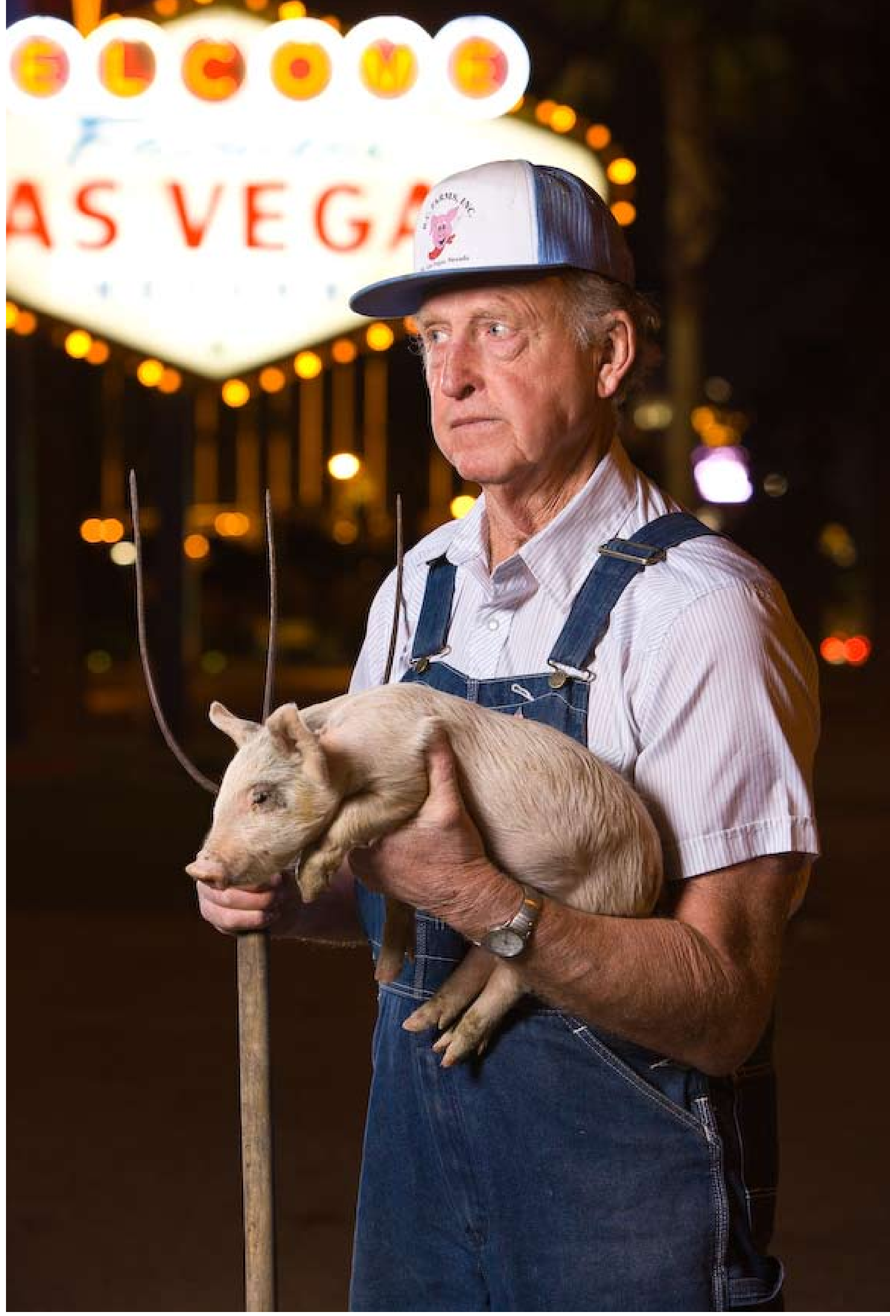
So the casinos love him. But what about his neighbors? Not exactly.

Times have changed since Combs moved to Vegas in 1963. Back then, his ranch sat in the middle of nowhere. "I could shoot in any direction without concern about anybody," he says. The worst he had to deal with were "pig rasslers" and the occasional pleasure-seeking couples in dark cars. "I used to make pretty good money once in a while pulling guys out of the sand. They always had somebody else's girlfriend or wife with them, necking out there in the desert, and their cars get stuck, they notice my lights are on. 'Can you *pleeeease* get me out?'"

But the town grew, and stucco houses with Spanish-tile roofs started closing in on him. The wafting odor of chili coming from the feeding truck is nothing compared to the smell that the pigs produce. When the wind blows just right—or wrong, rather—a sweetly fetid smell fills the air. And the neighbors start grousing.

In 2001, the Clark County Air Quality Department, started levying fines upwards of $50,000. Combs took measures to reduce the smell—namely, pouring concrete in the pigpens so he can spray out the stink before the manure mixes with food and straw.

He's still in the process of renovating the pens. But the smell must have improved at least a



Town and Country Combs keeps a wary eye on real estate developers and his neighbors.

little. The Clark County School District is building an elementary school abutting Combs' property. "The less it smells, the closer they get!" he says.

The closer the neighbors, the higher Combs' guard goes up. Developers approach him all the time, offering up to $70 million for his land. Combs calls them "tire kickers." Still, he and Janet won't entertain the idea of selling. The farm is their legacy, their life's purpose, and a place where their grandchildren can have a taste of country life.

"We're the only agriculture here," Janet says. "We're it."

A THIRD-GENERATION pig farmer, Combs grew up around swine in Prescott, Arizona, where his father hauled scraps from military bases.

Some of Combs' first memories are of hogs. "I used to like their tails," he says. "We'd walk out to the pig pens and all these tails were in my face, because I was short. And I remember pigs tails and sauerkraut my mother used to make. And mmm-boy, that was good stuff!"

Clearly, he's never grown too attached to the pigs as individuals. Despite their intelligence—the animals are smarter than dogs—Combs has always known that they're being raised for food: "Like the Englishman says, 'We love our pigs. But we love to eat them, too.'"

Combs always figured he'd be a pig farmer, but after he was kicked out of California Polytechnic State University for low grades, he wasn't sure where his farm would be. Then, in the early '60s, he and the family visited Las Vegas while celebrating his father's 70th birthday. His dad was stricken not only by the enormousness of the Strip but by the enormousness of the Strip's waste. "When he came over here, he seen all the hotels, he said, 'I don't think they're taking it home in Bowser bags,'" Combs says.

Combs sought out the local pig farm, and found a large piece of property with no pigs in sight, on account of a recent bout of syphilis. Pigs or no pigs, the farmer still had a contract with the hotels to remove their scraps, so he burned the trash as it came to the farm. The farmer wanted to sell, and Combs wanted to buy. Though the property wasn't much more than a garbage-burning dump, it was a perfect match for a man like Combs, who could sew a silk purse from a sow's ear, and vice versa. "Let's just say it wasn't a turn-key operation," Combs says. "It's more pick-and-shovel."

The farm looks like an Old West shantytown, most of it built by Combs. He constructed the pigpens out of varying combinations of trash: aluminum landing mats from air strips, old wood, used roofing. Pieces of non-functioning pipe line the doors of the pens, like bars on a jail. "I wasn't going to run water through it, so it did what I wanted it to do," he says. "I bought it and I made it into pieces of a hog house."

Clearly, Combs has never grown too attached to the pigs as individuals. He uses a quote to sum up his view: 'We love our pigs. But we love to eat them too.'

Chickens roam the property and ducks wallow in a pond that Combs dug. After traveling the country, he says he learned that farms everywhere have two things in common: a farmhouse and a pond. So he created a pond, complete with a bridge, which appears to be made from particleboard.

Combs did not build his own home, but it's made from World War II ammunition boxes and part of it does look like a farmhouse. Combs dedicated one room entirely to mounted animals that he or his loved ones shot: moose, elk, deer, even a razorback. Lest you forget where you are, the home's décor could best be described as, well, porcine. Someone plugged a small hole in the bathroom wall with a tiny pig beanbag. Signs around the commode proclaim "Fat is Beautiful" and "All I Need to Know in Life I Learned From a Pig." Another reads "Don't Hog the Bathroom."

Outside, the theme turns to junkyard, with abandoned stoves and boilers, trailers and an RV, trucks, trashcans and even unwanted homes that were transported here.

"See that chimney? That's an expensive chimney," he says, pointing to a blue cylinder atop a boiler. Following a dramatic pause, he breaks into a broad smile. "That's three barrels! I stuck them together!"

Combs is what scientists would call a detrivore, a species that recycles decomposing organic matter and reintroduces it to the food chain. Usually, the term describes insects, like woodlice and dung beetles. Like them, this pig farmer is the final stop in the garbage world, taking leftovers of any kind food, from food to old pipes, and storing them on the farm.

"My mother always said, 'Waste not, want not,'" says Combs. "That was her slogan. We always had to clean our plates. She was a hillbilly, with all due respect to her. A Kentucky coalminer's daughter. So she knew hard times. She lived through the Depression. And so you just didn't waste." Now, that and "the three R's"—reduce, reuse, and recycle—have become his motto.

His wife, Janet, adds a fourth R: "ridiculous." She prefers to have something new from time to time.

Being in the middle of nowhere came with some surprises. Combs once found a body on his property. He changes the subject when pressed for details. A rape victim once ran away and came to R.C. Farms for help. She has sent the Combses

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a Christmas card for the past 30 years, thanking them.

In the early ’80s, a former assistant district attorney asked Combs a peculiar favor: Hide a car that belonged to a man connected to the mob. Police had shot up the car in a traffic stop, and the driver had been killed. For obvious reasons, the name and circumstances surrounding the case remain under wraps. But Combs did as he was asked, putting the car under straw bales. Once the trial ended, the victim’s family picked up the car and took it to another state. Combs won’t say more about the incident.

Back in the early ’70s, hog cholera hit. Known for high fevers and nervousness followed by death, the epidemic swept the country. One hundred fifty of the Combs’ hogs came down with the disease. Because of the high rate of transmission, Combs had to put down every pig on the property—all 6,000 of them.

Though more potential scares followed—African Swine Flu hit in the mid-’70s—the farm remains healthy, and hog cholera was successfully eradicated in 1978. Now, the Swine Health Protection Act requires Combs and other pig farmers to cook any and all meat products served to hogs. The act isn’t in place to protect those of us who eat bacon but to keep the pigs from going through another epidemic.

Combs’ fulfills those requirements, and more. He provides his hogs with ample space to walk around in their pens, and gives antibiotic shots only if the pigs get sick, unlike many corporate farms around the country.

Though Combs has always been a religious man, his faith wasn’t fully tested until 1991. That’s when he and his friend, Tom Collins, now a Clark County Commissioner, were riding together in Combs’ Bronco. With Collins behind the wheel, the vehicle spun out of control and veered into the front end of a 32-foot trailer. Combs’ head was literally cracked open. He made it to the hospital, where his doctor announced that he was mortally wounded.

”I didn’t know what that word was,” Janet says. “I told everybody as long as there’s life in him, I know how he fights. And he’ll fight out of it if it’s possible.”

With Combs in a coma, Janet remembers sitting by his bed, talking to him and holding his hand. On the ninth day, he squeezed her hand. Her husband was coming back.

It was a long recovery. Combs had extensive brain damage, and needed to re-learn everything. His muscles had atrophied, and he had to build them back up. He did it, just as Janet knew he would.

“I’m grateful,” Combs says. “You don’t really miss nothing until you’ve lost it. God gave some of us a grace, a blessing, by giving us a close call. Then we can see what could have happened. So then we straighten up and fly right.”

‘I’m grateful,’ Combs says of his near-death experience. ‘God gave some of us a grace, a blessing, by giving us a close call. So then we straighten up and fly right.’

He still speaks with a slight slur and tires easily but has made a remarkable recovery for a man who was given a death sentence.

JANET AND COMBS might like to convert their pig farm to what she calls a “pizza farm,” transforming the property into an agricultural pie chart, raising hogs, cows, tomatoes, wheat, and everything you’d find on a pizza. Or they might turn the place into a Western village or maybe a Hawaiian village, with live music and hoedowns or luaus. One of their grandkids could do the accounting. The other could do the public relations.

Combs still works on R.C. Farms every day. Occasionally, the 69-year-old checks on the routes. One of his favorite stops is Jerry’s Nugget, a casino that opened just a year after the farm. Located a few miles north of the Strip, this area runs at a slower pace. In his plaid farmer’s shirt and his jean jacket embroidered with “Combs,” the farmer blends in better.

He leaves his truck with the valet and checks on his trash bins in back. Two Dumpsters brim with food. From sausage to gooey vegetables, if you can order it at Jerry’s, it’s here.

Satisfied with the bins, Combs goes inside, noting that Jerry’s used to have 49-cent bacon and eggs when they opened (now it’s $4.89). When he’s unable to finish that meal, Gracie, his waitress, asks if he wants a doggie bag.

“You don’t give out any more Bowser bags,” Combs half-jokes with the woman. “Let them take all it out and put it in my bins.”

“Oh, I’ll have them put it in your bins, real nice,” Gracie says, in a monotone. “You ever gonna move your pig farm?”

“Oh, Honey,” he half-smiles, shaking his head.

“You just say, ‘I was there first,’ and let them keep smelling it,” says Gracie.

“That’s the smell of freedom,” Combs says. As Gracie leaves, he whispers, “I’ll give her a tip for that.”

On the way out of Jerry’s, Combs tips the valet $5 and climbs back into his pickup truck. Incensed by his speed of 10 mph, drivers shake their fists and him and blare their horns.

“Must be in a hurry to get to work,” he says, as he heads back to his farm. A dump truck will soon follow, bringing home the bacon in more ways than one.

Kate Silver is a Las Vegas-based freelancer whose work has appeared in Playboy, People, *and* Time Out Las Vegas.