

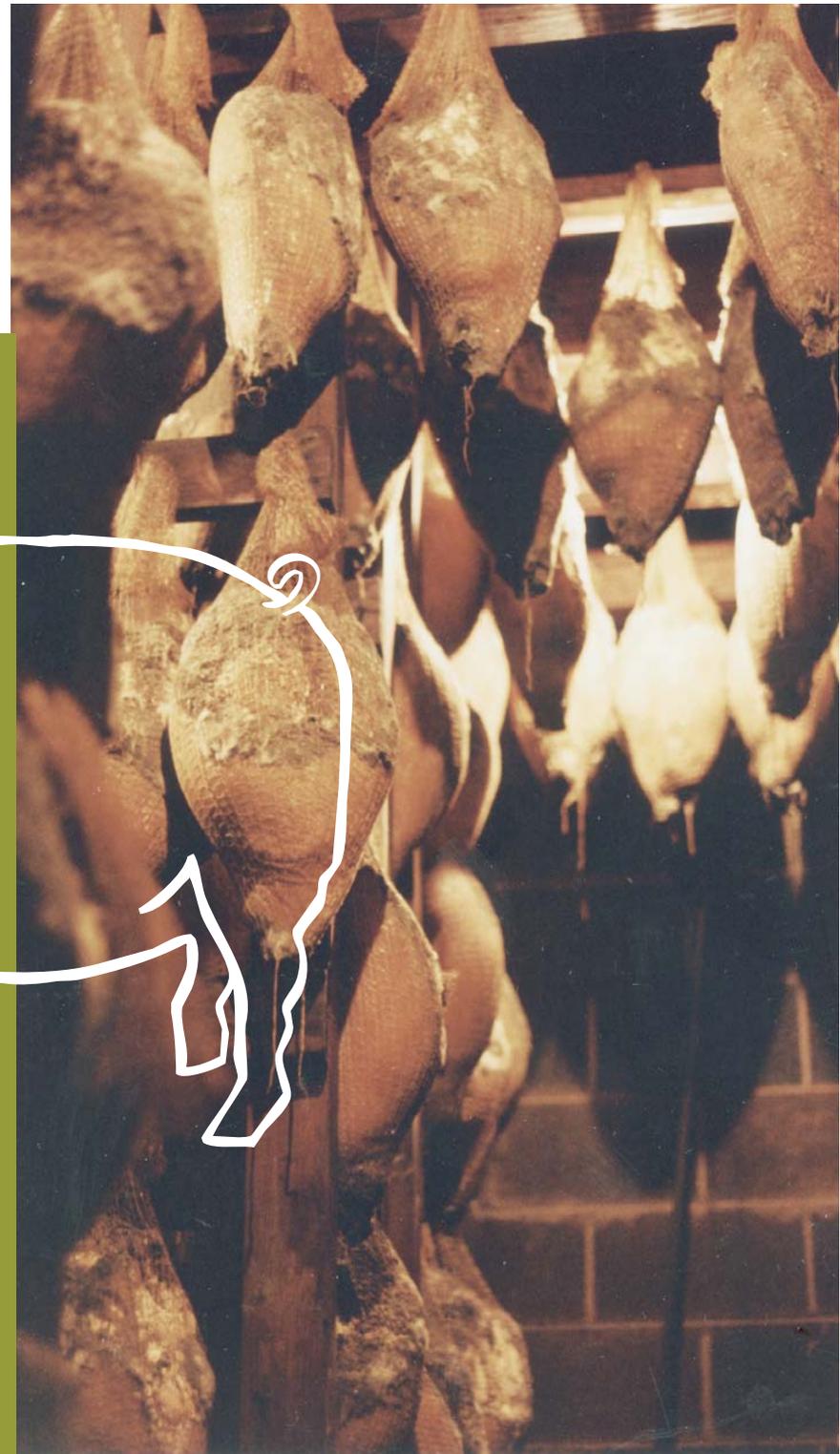
RAW TALENT

America's ham artisans



MUSEUM OF FOOD AND DRINK

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ARTISANAL COUNTRY HAM

If you were raised in America, you probably think of ham the way it's traditionally found in grocery stores today—pumped full of water and ready to be dressed in its holiday best, topped with pineapples. Introduced in the 20th century, these "city hams" are cheap to produce and are the most popular hams in this country. But American artisanal ham producers have been producing an entirely different, superior product for the past four centuries: ham that is dry-cured and aged, called "country ham." This exhibit will introduce you to our native rare country hams and demonstrate how they compare to their European counterparts.

As Americans have adopted the city ham as their standard, dry curing country hams has become a dying art in the American South.

City ham, country ham

You don't find dry-cured American country ham in grocery-store delis. It simply isn't mass marketed like city ham. Country hams are expensive to produce: They require six months to a year of aging and, because they lose at least 18 percent of their weight during drying, they cost more per pound retail. And country hams aren't necessarily ideal for American consumers. Few families have room in the refrigerator for a whole leg of pig, and few are comfortable hand-carving this type of ham the way it should be served—in small, very thin slices.

Long ago, meat packers figured out a way around the obstacles of the country ham and developed the "city ham." City hams are pumped full of a brine mixture (usually water, salt, sugar, nitrates and other chemicals) that reduces the curing time to almost nothing. The brined meat is moist enough to be carved into thick slabs and eaten with a fork and knife. As Americans have adopted this type of ham as their standard, dry curing has become a dying art in the American South.

Raw feed: Is country ham safe to eat uncooked?

Yes. USDA-approved country hams have been cured and are safe to eat without further cooking. Labels can be misleading: Some producers opt to label their cured country hams NRTE (a USDA designation for not-ready-to-eat) because this avoids the scrutiny of inspectors, and because the custom in America is to cook the hams, anyway. This is unfortunate. The cooking instructions included on these hams will turn the meat into salt-encrusted shoe leather.



City Ham



Country Ham

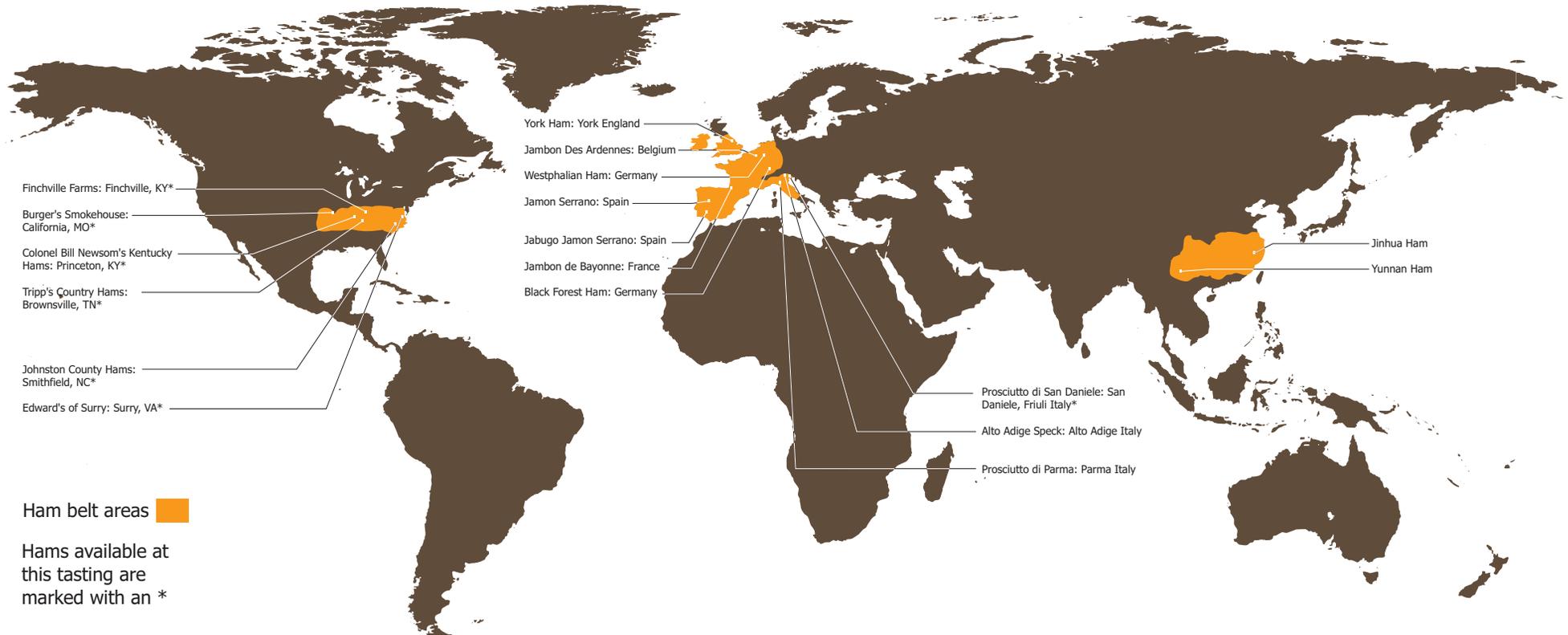
HAM SPAN: the world's ham belt

Curing hams was a matter of necessity in the days before producers could rely on commercial refrigeration. When cold weather arrived, farmers (most of whom kept pigs) had to choose between slaughtering their pigs and feeding them through the lean winter months. Usually they decided to slaughter them. American farmers living in areas like Virginia, Tennessee, Kentucky and North Carolina, where winter temperatures hover between 32 and 42 degrees, were in luck: They could dry-cure their slaughtered pigs during the winter without risk of spoilage or freezing. In states farther south, like Florida, the pork would spoil in warm temperatures; in the north, hams would freeze, preventing the cure from penetrating the meat. During the springtime, mild weather in the good ham-curing states gave the hams time to equalize their salt content and begin drying out. The hot, fairly humid summers in the American South are likewise perfect for the next stage in the process: Higher temperatures activate enzymes that break down proteins and fats in the meat, giving the finished product a distinct aged flavor. This process is referred to as "the sweat." Heat = aging = flavor. And humidity keeps the ham from getting too dry. So while Virginia has always been a state for ham lovers, Arizona is not: A Phoenix summer would produce a crop of dry, oversized paperweights.

Of course today we can create ideal ham-curing conditions almost anywhere, with a period of artificial refrigeration followed by a period of heat and humidity. Some

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good ham, for instance, is now made in Canada. But the culture of great ham started-and lives on-in the world's ham belt, which runs through the southeastern United States, southern and central Europe, and southern China. To this day, artisans in those regions are making hams in ambient conditions with no artificial temperature controls. As a result, their hams are distinct to a year and region, much like wine. Some of the hams at this exhibit were produced in ambient or semi-ambient conditions, and their slightly milder flavors this year reflect the cooler summer temperatures throughout the southeast in 2004.



CURING, BREEDING, CHOOSING

Cure Genius

Ham-curing begins with a fresh ham and a salt rub. The ingredients in the rub vary by region: Italians and Spanish use straight salt rubs for prosciutto and Serrano hams. Many American country hams are cured with a combination of salt and brown or white sugar, and occasionally added nitrates (saltpeter has been used for hundreds of years). The sugar is not for sweetness, rather it softens the harshness of the salt and the toughening effects of the nitrates. Although machines are used to cure some mass-produced hams, all of the American hams at this show have been hand salted by skilled artisans. After finishing the cure, many producers still use traditional methods to protect their hams against pesky bugs during the drying process by covering the ham with red and black pepper. Italians rub prosciutto with a protective layer of lard to slow drying.



Coating hams with pepper: photo courtesy of Colonial Williamsburg Foodways Division



Ham salting: photo courtesy of Colonial Williamsburg Foodways Division

This little piggy

Most hams come from pigs that were bred for commercial use and raised in factories. Factory pigs gain weight quickly, bear many offspring, and, to suit today's consumer, have very little fat. This wasn't always the norm. Until the rise of vegetable oils and shortening, lard was one of the most important pig products, and pigs were raised to be as fat as possible. Today's lean pigs are relatively cheap to produce, because they require less feed. Unfortunately, super lean pork does not make great country ham. Dry-cured ham needs fat; without it, the meat is rough in the mouth and overly salty. Some big pork producers have started putting a little more fat back into their pork, and we can only hope that others will follow.

The fresh ham

When choosing a fresh ham to cure, producers select their size, and then decide how they want the skin trimmed and how long they want the shank cut. You can often identify a ham's origin just by looking at it: American producers typically choose hams that weigh between 20 and 23 pounds and often cut off a collar of skin around the butt end of the ham. American ham shanks are usually shorter than European shanks. The Spanish traditionally start with much larger pigs and cut off a large piece of skin into an easily identifiable V shape. The Spanish prefer long shanks, often with the hoof included; the Spanish Iberico "pata negra" comes with a black hoof, a sign of its pedigree. Italian producers leave all of the skin on their hams to protect the prosciutto from over-drying, and, like the Spanish, prefer long shanks.

SMOKING, HANGING, SLICING

Smoke them if you've got them

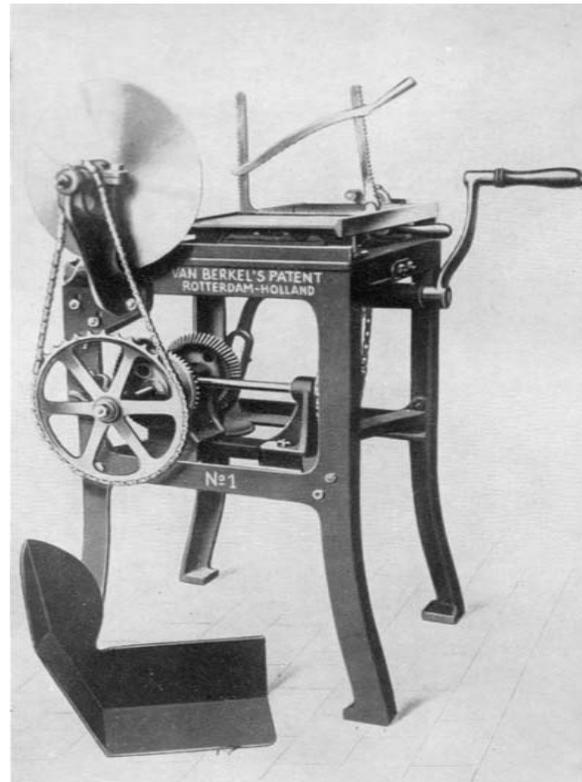
We usually associate the smoking process with flavor, but in the past-both in America and in Europe-smoking provided an extra layer of food safety: It helped kill bacteria. Smoking in Europe depends mainly on geography. In the southern sections of the ham belt, such as Spain and most of Italy, producers have left their hams unsmoked, while those in Alpine Italy, Germany, the UK and Belgium have smoked their hams. In the United States, Tidewater Virginia is known for heavy smoking and North Carolina is known for little or no smoking, but everywhere else it's the producer's preference and not the location that determines the use of smoke. Farmers just miles from each other might use entirely different techniques of curing and/or smoking. Those who do smoke their hams in the U.S. tend to use hickory or oak; Europeans also use hardwoods but sometimes add aromatics such as juniper.

How's it hanging?

How to hang the ham: hock up or hock down? It's not as silly a question as you might think. Hanging hock up, as you see in most stores, causes the ham to assume a narrow bullet shape. This helps hams dry out faster, which the Spanish like. Most Americans hang their hams hock down, because it pulls the ham into a squatter "ham" shape and leads to moister ham, which suits the American palate.

The slice is right

W. A. Van Berkel patented the first commercial meat slicer in 1898, ushering in an era of modern slicing and eventually eliminating the need for highly skilled slicing personnel at butcher shops and delis. In the days before this technology, prosciutto and serrano ham was left on the bone and painstakingly sliced into strips, parallel with the muscle fibers. Many Spanish butchers have maintained this slicing tradition, however the vast majority of these European hams are now boned out and machine sliced paper-thin across the grain. Ham aficionados still insist on slicing meat the old way, parallel to the grain, claiming that slicing this way increases the chewiness (some might say toughness) as well as the perception of flavor. They also claim that meat slicers, especially the fast-spinning modern ones, melt the fat of the ham slices, thereby ruining the ham's mouth-feel. This point is debatable-but the advantages of machine slicing are not. Slicing a boned ham on a machine reduces waste and produces a uniform, extremely tender slice. And we can thank Berkel for the proliferation of prosciutto-style ham: The emergence of machine slicing has brought thinly sliced cured ham to people around the world, and to many who would never have gone to the trouble of tasting hams that needed to be hand sliced by a trained carver.



World's first meat slicer 1898
photo: courtesy of Berkel Company



A man and his slicer: W A Van Berkel
photo: courtesy of Berkel Company

AGING, FEEDING, NAMING

Age before beauty

Producing a perfect ham is a balancing act. While aging develops and concentrates a ham's rich flavor, it also reduces moisture and accentuates saltiness. Fat inside the ham helps counteract these effects, so fat level is key: a ham with generous amounts of fat can be aged longer for more intense flavor without drying out. The particular flavor depends on where the ham was produced. Micro-ecosystems are so important that some experts say they can taste and smell the difference in hams aged in two different rooms at the same facility. Some of these distinguishing flavor traits come from mold that grows on the outside of the ham; like rind on a cheese, the mold contributes to the flavor of the meat.

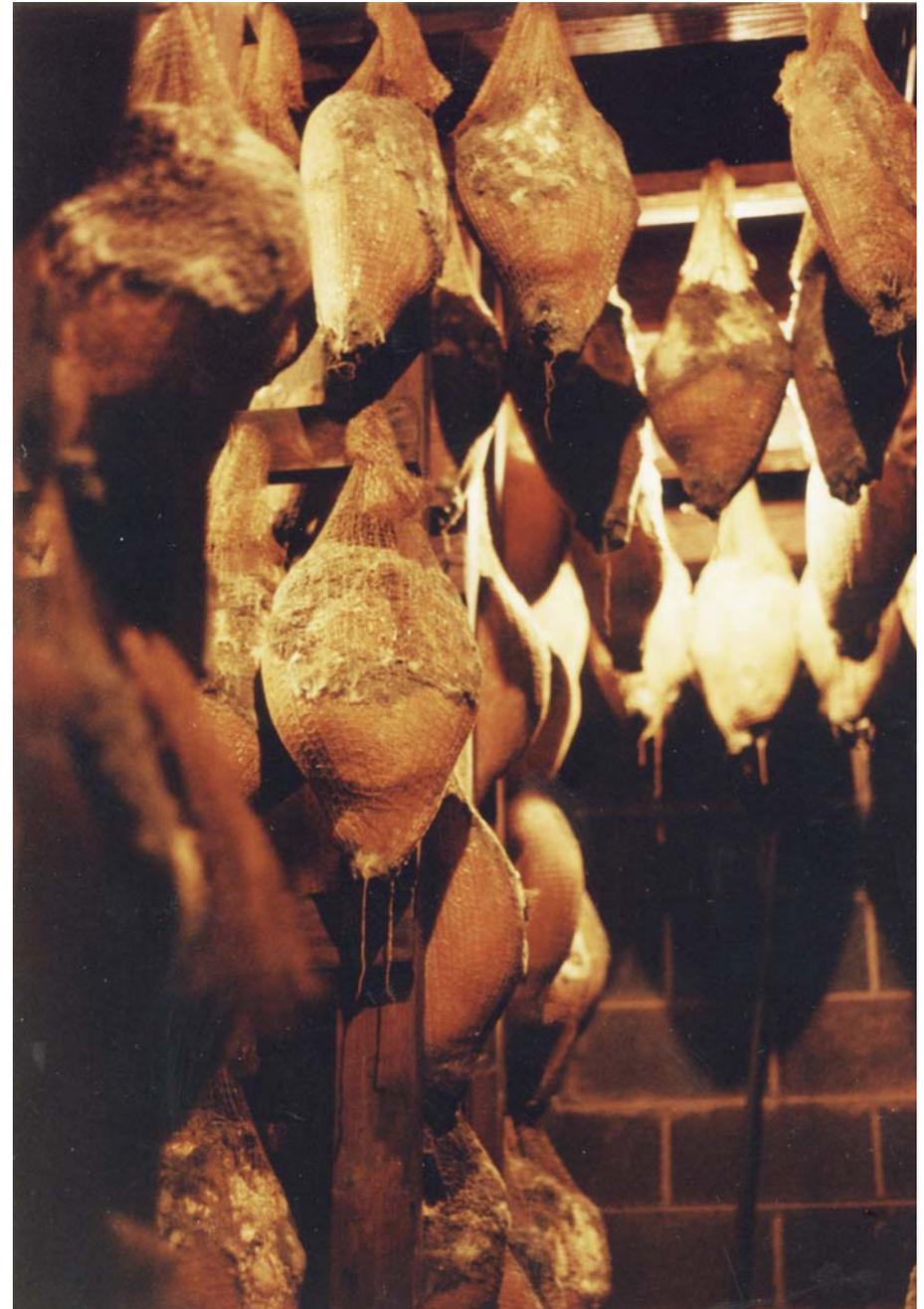
They are what they eat

Prior to the rise of large-scale industrial farming, pigs were usually fed scraps and byproducts from the farm. Pigs are voracious omnivores and will fatten themselves with almost anything you throw in front of them. Historically, the flavor of a pig's meat was determined by where the pig found its meals: Those raised by brewers ate barley mash (the resulting meat wasn't all that tasty), while those raised on dairy farms in northern Italy ate leftover whey, which produced incredibly delicious pork (ideal for prosciutto). Perhaps the happiest pigs were those who lived on farms near the forest, because they were allowed to forage the woods for hickory nuts and acorns. This feeding style is called mast feeding, and it produces fantastic ham. Very few pigs are raised this way today, and what was a thrifty practice in the past has become an incredible luxury. The famed Iberico ham from Spain, raised on acorns, fetches a huge price and is not yet imported into this country.

Just as you wouldn't call a California pinot noir a Burgundy (even though it's made from the same grape), you shouldn't call our regional cured hams "American prosciutto."

Proud to be an American

Countries in the ham belt have distinct methods of curing and serving ham. Just as you wouldn't call a California pinot noir a Burgundy (even though it's made from the same grape), you shouldn't call our regional cured hams "American prosciutto" or "American Serrano" when they're served uncooked. Hams from Virginia, Kentucky and other states hold their own against Italian and Spanish hams and should be referred to by their proper designation: artisanal country hams. Confusing the names does both parties a disservice.



Hams in the aging room: photo courtesy of Nancy Mahaffey, Colonel Newsom's Country Hams

Ham List

AMBIENT-CURE AMERICAN COUNTRY HAM

These hams are cured and aged without the use of temperature or humidity control, just as they would have been in the 17th century. They are made according to the cycles of the seasons, not the cycles of the market. Because their aging is dependant on climate, they exhibit vintage effects, like great wine.

1. **Colonel Newsom's Kentucky Ham**, Kentucky
1.5 years old
Salt and brown sugar cure
Hickory smoked several weeks



Mrs. Nancy Mahaffey, the colonel's daughter, uses a family cure recipe that was handed down in a will in the 1700's. She is a true artisan.

2. **Finchville Farms**, Kentucky
1.5 years old
Salt, brown sugar, red & black pepper "in bag" cure
Not smoked



Curing hams the old fashioned way for generations, Finchville Farms auctioned off a prize-winning country ham two years ago for \$250,000.00. Bill Robertson, the cure-master and owner, arrests the aging process at about 14 months by placing the ham under refrigeration. Because this ham is not smoked and contains no nitrates, it makes an interesting comparison to both the non-smoked, non-nitrated, Italian prosciutto and the smoked, non-nitrated, Colonel Newsom's ham.

3. **Burger's Smokehouse Attic Aged Ham**, Missouri
1.5 years old
Salt, brown sugar, black pepper, nitrate "in bag" cure
Not smoked



The Burgers emigrated from Germany in the 1800's and brought their curing knowledge with them. Although they are one of the largest country ham producers, they still make a line of traditional, ambient cured, long-aged hams. Because this ham is not smoked but contained nitrates, it makes an interesting comparison to the non-smoked, non-nitrated Finchville Farms ham.

4. **Mystery Ham**, North Carolina
2.5 years old
Cure unknown, contains nitrates
Smoked

This 2.5 year old ham was cured by an unknown amateur ham maker in North Carolina and donated to us by meat scientist Dr. Dana Hanson of NC State University in North Carolina. This ham is typical of what you can find traveling the back roads of the southeast. Unfortunately, fewer and fewer hams like this are being produced every year. These home-cured hams are not USDA inspected and cannot be commercially shipped over state lines. Because of its age, this ham is extremely dry. Smaller American hams do not have the size and fat content to age the way a classic Serrano ham would.

SEMI-AMBIENT-CURE AMERICAN COUNTRY HAM

This type of ham is started under temperature and humidity control, but is allowed to do most of its aging at ambient temperatures. This process allows the producer to make hams all year-round, with more control at the initial stages, while still getting vintage effects from ambient aging.

5. **Edwards of Surry Wigwam Ham**, Virginia
1.5 years old
Duroc/Berkshire cross pig
Salt and nitrate cure
black pepper coated
Hickory smoked 1-2 weeks



The Edwards family has been curing hams for generations. They have a great ability to merge current scientific thought and tradition. This ham has the heaviest smoke of any in the tasting, as is the style in tidewater Virginia. The way this ham is cut and hung is more European in style than a typical Virginia ham, enhancing slicability. This ham is also large, which is good for long aging. Sam Edwards has started experimenting with specialty pork -- pioneering its use among commercial ham producers.

MODERN TEMPERATURE-CONTROLLED-CURE, SHORTER-AGED AMERICAN COUNTRY HAM

These hams are cured and aged under temperature and humidity control. They are also aged for a shorter time than the others in the tasting. The two producers we have are top-class producers of this type of ham.

6. **Johnston County Hams**, North Carolina
6 months old
Salt, white sugar and nitrate cure
Hickory smoked ~1 day



Johnston County Hams was originally an "ice house" cold storage facility. When homeowners in the area bought refrigerators in the 1940's, the ice house was no longer in demand...and Johnston switched to ham production. Cure-master Rufus Brown is widely respected for his ham knowledge. This ham is specifically cured by Mr. Brown to slice well uncooked.

7. **Tripp's Country Hams**, Tennessee
4-5 months old
Salt, sugar and nitrate cure
Smoked several days

Like Johnston County Hams, Tripp's began as a cold-storage facility. The Current owner, Charlie Tripp, learned curing from his father. The Tripp ham is smaller than the other hams in this tasting. A smaller ham ages faster than a larger one and will slice well even when young.

EUROPEAN TEMPERATURE-CONTROLLED-CURE HAM

8. **Prosciutto di San Daniele**, Italy
Aged 400 days
Grain & whey fed white Yorkshire pig
Salt cure
Lard coated, not smoked

Don't confuse this ham with the domestic ham of the same name. San Daniele is a town in Italy that is totally dedicated to the production of this ham. Ham is all they do and they do it well.