

Bringing Flavor Back to the Ham



Jay Paul for The New York Times

THE CURE Sam Edwards makes a ham called Surryano, a Virginia version of Serrano.

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HAVE you ever placed a vanishingly thin morsel of rosy meat on your tongue and had it fill your mouth with deepest porkiness, or the aroma of tropical fruits, or caramel, or [chocolate](#)? Or all of the above?



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ADD SALT S. Wallace Edwards & Sons sells ham in Virginia.

A really good dry-cured ham can do just that. Not a standard pink, cooked ham, juicy with injected brine, but a raw ham preserved by the application of dry salt, hung up to age for months or years, then sliced paper-thin and eaten as is, uncooked, yet transformed into the intense, silken essence of meat.

Spain and Italy are renowned for the quality of their dry-cured hams, their jamons and prosciuttos, which can sell for \$30 to \$100 a pound. America is not so renowned, even though dry-cured hams have been made in the South since Colonial times. These country hams evolved into an inexpensive regional product whose usual fate is to be soaked in water, then poached and baked with a sweet fruit glaze.

Happily, the home ham picture began to brighten a few years ago. I recently tasted dry-cured hams from Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee and Iowa, and some rival Europe's best. Their makers are variously determined to revive country ham and to develop American versions of European classics. They have made significant progress by rediscovering the ingredients that made dry-cured ham so good in the first place, when pigs were fattened on the autumn harvest and their meat preserved for scarcer times.

Above all there's the pig, which should be mature, well fed and free to run around. Muscles of such an animal are packed with the raw materials for creating flavor, enzymes that will catalyze the first stage of that creation, and fat to lend tenderness and moistness.

Then there's time. It takes many months for muscle enzymes to break down flavorless proteins into savory amino acids, odorless fats into aromatic fragments, and for all these chemical bits and pieces to interact and generate new layers of flavor. And it takes months for meat to lose moisture and develop a density of flavor and texture.

A century ago, American country ham makers had the pigs and took the time. A Virginian named Samuel Wallace Edwards once wrote that when he began his career in 1910, he worked with mature hogs "that roamed the woods and fields of southern Virginia, gleaning the acorns, roots, peanuts and corn" after the fall harvest. After a salting in the winter and cold-smoking in the spring, the hams hung for up to a year in wood buildings that were as hot or cold as the weather outside. Summer temperatures reached the 90s and accelerated the chemical reactions that create flavor.

But by 1962, when Mr. Edwards penned his recollection, in the local newspaper, most hogs were confined, fed growth-stimulating antibiotics and slaughtered at a young 5 or 6 months, all in the name of “progress, speed and the American dollar.” Now most country hams are made from confined fast-growing pigs, cured for not much longer than the legal minimum of 70 days, and just aren’t very flavorful.

Mr. Edwards’s grandson Sam now runs S. Wallace Edwards & Sons in Surry, Va. “The country ham industry shot itself in the foot,” he said. “We decided that the cheapest price wins, so we took a great product and reduced the quality and turned it into a commodity.” In the decades after World War II, he said, the number of ham makers fell to about 50 from more than a thousand.

A few, including Edwards & Sons, continued to age some hams for up to a year. When American chefs discovered them as a domestic alternative to European hams, the makers began to market their better hams as prosciutto. But they were making them from the same young industrial hogs.

“I experimented with the aging and found that my hams had the best flavor at 18 months,” Mr. Edwards said. “But the meat was so lean that they got too salty and dry.”

About five years ago, Patrick Martins of Heritage Foods USA told Mr. Edwards about Berkshire pigs, a heritage breed with a talent for accumulating fat in its muscles, and a high proportion of enzyme-rich, flavorful red muscle fibers. Chefs were buying all the loins Mr. Martins’s farm network could supply, but no one wanted the legs.

Mr. Edwards cured some Berkshire hams and found he could age them two years and more without drying them out. He now makes his premium Surryano hams from 8- to 10-month-old Berkshire pigs raised outdoors in Missouri, aging them at least 400 days.



Surryano, left, a Virginia version of Serrano, right.



David LaSpina

Herb and Kathy Eckhouse of Iowa make a prosciutto under the La Quercia brand.

Carmen Quagliata serves Surryano ham at Union Square Cafe, where he is executive chef. “I love that it’s sweet and rosy and porky,” he said, “not as dry and salty as most Virginia ham but still with that real smoky flavor. I’m Italian and I love prosciutto, and the Edwards ham is a perfect mix of both worlds.”

Other makers are curing small numbers of hams from unconfined Berkshire pigs, and adjusting production methods to make even their leaner hams delicious uncooked. At Benton’s Smoky Mountain Country Hams in Madisonville, Tenn., Allan Benton has adapted his grandfather’s recipe to make hams that are a favorite with chefs, including [David Chang](#) at Momofuku Ssam Bar.

At Newsom’s Country Hams in Princeton, Ky., Nancy Newsom Mahaffey makes hams as her father, Bill Newsom, did, with up to 27 months of aging at ambient temperatures. The heat of two Kentucky summers gives the rare older hams intense flavor with a chocolate note. Herb and Kathy Eckhouse are first-generation ham makers in Norwalk, Iowa, where they’ve produced a widely praised “prosciutto Americano” under the La Quercia brand since 2005. The Eckhouses’ unsmoked Italian-style prosciuttos are cured at cooler temperatures than country hams and retain a bright, fruity aroma.

American ham makers are also working on the feed for their Berkshire hogs. European research found that the primeval fall diet of acorns and wild greens provided the ideal mix of fats and antioxidants for dry-cured hams, with the fat approaching the healthful composition of olive oil. Skeptical, Mr. Eckhouse compared hams from pigs fed on acorns, and on corn and soybeans. “It wasn’t an instrumental analysis,” he said. “I ate them. The differences were much bigger than I expected, especially in texture. The acorn-fed ham was creamy.”

Mr. Eckhouse now produces a small number of hams from acorn-fed pigs, and cutting-edge country ham makers are trying feeds made from a variety of nuts, grains and fruits. The pigs won't be gleaning woods and fields as in the old days, but they're likely to end up eating a similar diet. Their hams will taste the better for it.

It's true that these new hams are salty, fatty and pricey. But they're so flavorful that an ounce will give you 10 mouth-filling bites, without throwing your diet or budget out of whack. They're worth every milligram and dime.

Berkshire hams are in scant supply and sold mainly to restaurants. But Edwards's Surryano is \$19.95 for 12 ounces at virginiatrading.com, (800) 222-4267. La Quercia's Green Label prosciutto, from a Berkshire cross, is \$32.95 a pound for 8- to 10-pound pieces at laquercia.us, (515) 981-1625.