

Country Ham

By Dan Gill, Ethno-Gastronomist

Ham's substantial, ham is fat

Ham is firm and sound.

Ham's what God was getting at

When He made pigs so round

Roy Blount Jr.

Home curing of country hams is a dying art that has been practiced in rural Virginia since hogs roamed freely on Jamestown Island. Until about the middle of the last century practically every farm had a smokehouse large enough for the meat of several hogs to be cured, then hung from the rafters to be smoked and aged. Often the roof was steeply pitched with a king post in the center and additional cross beams studded with wooden pegs to provide additional hanging space. The eaves were vented to allow air movement and avoid stale smoke. There were usually wide plank tables along the walls where the meat was laid out to be salted, or the salted meat was packed in hollowed logs or boxes to cure. The floor was dirt and sometimes there was a hole or depression in the center for a fire pit, or the fire pit was outside and the smoke delivered by a tunnel to keep the smokehouse from getting too hot.



A typical farm smokehouse located in Middlesex County. Note the kingpost and beams studded with wooden pegs for hanging meat to smoke and age. Nails would rust in short order.

Hogs were killed during cold weather in November or December, but

generally prior to the hard freezes in January, so that the carcasses could chill completely overnight and be ready for cutting and put in cure the next morning. A good "weather eye" was critical as frozen meat does not take salt well and an untimely warm spell could be disastrous. Everybody had their own cure mixture and some farmers were known far and wide for their exceptional hams. Cures were composed primarily of salt, which dissolves, penetrates the muscles, draws out water and does the real job of curing. Sugar, brown sugar or molasses was often added to reduce saltiness and produce a softer and more tender and succulent product. Often black pepper, paprika, spices and nitrates were added for flavor and to further reduce the risk of spoilage. Nitrates and nitrites occur naturally in raw salts and were therefore always an inadvertent part of classic cures. As refined salts replaced raw salts, saltpeter or sodium nitrite and nitrate were added to most cures for added safety and to enhance the development of the rich mahogany color typical of properly cured meat.

Hams, bacon, shoulders, jowls and fatback were coated heavily with cure and overhauled periodically to replace the salt that was being absorbed. Hams typically stay in cure for about two days per pound or for a month or two until they stop losing moisture and the surface dries. In commercial operations, hams are kept at 38-40°F for a month or more while they are "taking salt."

After the curing phase, hams are hung at temperatures in the 50°F range for several weeks for the salt to equalize throughout the tissues. This process corresponds to conditions occurring naturally during the spring. On the farm, this is the time hams were smoked, if at all, usually with hickory or apple wood. Cured meats are "cold-smoked" at less than 100°F. Above 120°F, protein starts to coagulate (cook), and the meat will not age properly.

After equalization, hams are ready to be aged for flavor development. In plants, curing room temperature is increased to about 80°F to simulate summer conditions. Commercial hams are held in aging rooms for a minimum of one month and up to a year or more for specialty hams. Under natural conditions, hams are considered to be fully cured after August but the longer they age, the better they get. My father insisted that a ham was not fit to eat until at least a year old and had developed white flecks in

the muscle. During the aging process, proteins are broken down by enzymes and other natural processes into flavorful peptides and amino acids. Free glutamates give hams the savory and appealing “umami” qualities and, over time, enough of the amino acid tyrosine is released to crystallize into the deposits that my father referred to as white flecks.



This is our old smoke house full of hams, bacon and bagged sausages being cured and smoked over hickory. Pork has been cured this way on farms in the Tidewater area of Virginia for hundreds of years. On the right are two-year-old hams weighing about thirty pounds each.

How long a ham can be aged without getting hard and dry depends upon the size of the ham and the amount and composition of fat. Commercial hams average about fifteen pounds or so and are too lean for prolonged aging. I prefer hams in the twenty to thirty pound range so that they can be aged for more than a year. I have cured hams weighing fifty pounds that I aged for over ten years. They were exquisite! Hams of this quality are best when sliced paper-thin and served raw, like prosciutto. Raw ham does not taste as salty as cooked ham and the curing and aging process eliminates any risk of trichinosis. Heritage breeds such as Tamworths and Berkshires have more fat covering and more marbling in the muscles. Hogs raised for specialty hams are also carried to heavier weights. Fat composition depends upon the ration. Commercial hogs raised in confinement and fed a corn based ration will have firm fat. Hogs raised on pasture and fed a varied diet will have softer fat and will taste and age better. Peanut fed hogs have very soft fat and large hams can be aged for several years. Smithfield hams became world famous because they were originally made

from peanut-fed hogs—by Virginia law. In 1966, the peanut-fed requirement was dropped as the hog industry moved to confinement facilities and corn based rations for economic reasons.



"Butt Ugly", a smoker that I made using a food warmer from the Langley AFB Officer's Club. It can be used as a cold smoker (<100° F), hot smoker (<200° F) or barbecue pit (<300° F) simply by sliding the wood stove in or out and regulating the fire. Old refrigerators make excellent smokers. Recycled commercial units work best because there is little plastic to be removed and the insulation is often fiberglass rather than foam.

Almost all of the small independent ham producers are gone now and exceptional hams are extremely hard to find—and expensive. Edward's Hams of Surry, Virginia is now curing a limited quantity of specialty hams mostly for the high-end restaurant trade, but they also offer some to retail customers. Their line of "Surryano" hams is based on pasture-raised Berkshire hogs, and they are aged for a year or more. Edwards is now curing some peanut-fed pork, but has pre-sold all of the hams before they even finished aging.

There are a number of ways to cook a country ham, but first it needs to be cleaned and soaked in cold water for a day or two to leach out some of the salt. Surface mold needs to be removed by thorough washing and scrubbing. Mold on a ham is normal and does not indicate that the ham is bad. I simply cook whole, skin-on hams in a slow oven, at less than 300°F. At the store, I smoke-cook them on the pit, preferably with cherry wood. In any event, internal temperature needs to reach at least 160°F in the thickest part of the muscle.

"Eternity is defined as two people and a country ham" - Anonymous