

An Essential Guide to Country Ham

Everything you need to know about America's greatest charcuterie.

Now reading An Essential Guide to Country Ham



Country ham is nothing like the ham you grew up with. Those gelatinous pink slices stacked between two slices of Wonder Bread and stuffed in your *Star Wars* lunchbox were city ham, wet cured and probably commercially produced on a mass scale. Country ham, on the other hand, is an American dry-cured ham, found primarily in the Southeast, made using old-world techniques brought over by colonists.

It wasn't a culinary thing then, but pure survival. "Country ham came when settlers killed their pigs in winter and had to be able to preserve them over the winter," says Stephen Barber, chef of Farmstead at Long Meadow Ranch in Napa, California, and a native Kentuckian who recently completed a kind of apprenticeship under Sam Edwards III, of Edwards

Virginia Smokehouse. “In those states, the temperature and humidity was just right to keep those hams great till spring came.”

Nowadays, country-ham makers still adhere to most of the centuries-old techniques that their parents and grandparents taught them, but with special attention to flavor and texture. It’s not inaccurate to think of today’s country hams as the American equivalent of *serrano* or prosciutto.

How They’re Made

Country hams start with the ham, or hind leg of a pig, which was traditionally slaughtered around the coldest time of the year, after Christmas. The leg is packed with salt and other preservatives, which draw out water and cure the pork. Often the mixture includes brown sugar or honey, used not to sweeten the meat but rather to take the edge off the saltiness. Many producers also include something spicy, like crushed black or red pepper—again, not necessarily to flavor the ham, but rather to provide a protective layer against insects while the meat is aging.

After they’re rubbed, the hams are cured for a month or more in a dry, cool room, then placed into nets and hung for three weeks or so in a somewhat warmer room. During this period, the outside of the ham dries out, and the salt becomes more evenly distributed throughout the inside. The next step is an aging room, where the hams are hung at room temperature, or slightly above, to develop flavor and texture and continue to lose moisture.

At some point in the aging process, the producers may smoke the hams. Most country hams are smoked nowadays, but many families still use recipes that skip the step altogether. “If you go back and look historically at why people smoked or didn’t smoke, it required a smokehouse on the farm, and many people just didn’t have that,” says Steven Burger of Burgers’ Smokehouse, which, despite the company’s name, doesn’t smoke its Attic Aged Hams. Those who do take the extra step use what’s called a cold smoke, at a low temperature that doesn’t cook the pork.

Whether smoking contributes to the flavor of country ham is a matter of some debate. Some producers, like Ronny Drennan, co-owner of Broadbent B & B Foods, say that the smoke is primarily an aesthetic choice. “We’re just putting a color on it—a good pecan color, deep reddish-brown,” Drennan says. “Probably not one out of one thousand people could taste the smoke.” Burger considers smoking a holdover from premodern times, when it was used as another deterrent against pests.

Other makers, however, insist smoking imbues the hams with extra complexity. They’re often loyal to their own wood blends, from the usual hickory or oak to the less common fruitwoods or other, more exotic, fuels. “Hickory, apple, oak—they do carry nuances,” says Sam Edwards.

Smoked or not, a country ham ends its time on the farm in the aging room, where it continues to develop its flavor and where it may stay for just weeks or two or three years. When they’re finished aging, the hams are sold unrefrigerated in cloth bags.

More and more country-ham makers are paying special attention to the breed of pigs they use, seeking out heritage breeds like Berkshires, Durocs, and Tamworths. If a country ham doesn’t note the breed, it’s likely from a standard commercially bred pig, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that you’ll like it any less.

In “young” hams—those aged for only a few months, at most—the flavor of country ham mostly consists primarily of salt and pork. “If you don’t like salt, you’re not going to care for country hams,” says Nancy Newsom, of Col. Bill Newsom’s Aged Kentucky Country Ham. Young ham is what most people remember when they think of country ham—the thick slabs of pink, Canadian-bacon-like pork that Cracker Barrel piles onto biscuits.

Aged long enough, however, a country ham turns from pink to a burgundy color, firmer and drier, and develops a complex array of flavors, often including a characteristic “funkiness” or “twang” often compared to a rich, ripe cheese. “The true country-ham aficionado appreciates the distinctive flavor of the older hams, and that’s what they’ll typically look for,” Burger

says. “Some competitors have even tended to veer into some of what I’d call a blue cheese sort of flavor.”

How to Eat Them

Ask a Southerner how they eat their country ham, and three out of four times they’ll tell you it’s a breakfast dish, cut into slices, fried lightly on both sides in a cast-iron skillet, and served either inside or alongside biscuits with red-eye gravy. “The worst thing you can do is overcook it,” Drennan says. “A lot of people here will cook it with some water, or honey and water, or in Coke or coffee grounds. But in any case, the best thing to do is, when it starts to look like the sweat on the outside is coming, flip it over—a couple of minutes on each side is plenty. So many people want to cook it till it’s like jerky, but, to me, the thinner and more tender it is, the better.”

Another popular option, especially among Virginians and elsewhere, is to bake the ham. Edwards suggests using an oven bag—the kind you might use to keep a Thanksgiving turkey moist—filled with a couple of cups of water. “The way we do it is: cook it with the steam method in the oven, and then once it’s cooled down enough to handle, slice it paper thin.” In Kentucky, another traditional method of cooking whole country hams, from before most people had stoves, involves blankets: “They’d put it in the water over the fire, bring it to a hard, rolling boil for a little less than an hour, and take it off the fire and wrap it in several quilts,” Nancy Newsom says. “The next morning, it’s ready.” Probably best to leave that to the hard-core enthusiasts and historical reenactors.

These days, premium country hams are appreciated as unadorned charcuterie. “If it’s well-aged, and that means more than a year, I just slice it thin and eat it like a European ham,” says Peter Kaminsky, author of *Pig Perfect*. This is how you’re likely to be served it in the fancier restaurants that have driven a resurgence of interest in the craft, like Momofuku Ssäm Bar in New York and the Publican in Chicago.

Before you serve a country ham, you may have to do some preparation. You may find some mold on the rind, which is perfectly normal, as with a prosciutto. Just cut it off. The same goes for the salt crust, which you may or may not want to pare off, depending on the ham and the dish. Many people soak their hams in water to eliminate some of the saltiness, anywhere from a few hours to two or three days. Others don't find the soaking to be useful, or swear by other methods to make it milder. "If you're sensitive to salt, parboil a ham steak to get the salt out, and then as you cook it, sprinkle a little sugar on it," Edwards says. Again, whether you soak or not depends on the ham, what you're using it for, and your sensitivity to salt.

How to Store Them

Unless you're sitting down for a holiday meal with your extended family, you're unlikely to finish off a whole country ham in a single sitting. Drennan suggests slicing off what you need and wrapping the rest in deli paper. If you plan on eating from the ham again soon, you can place it loosely in a paper sack or plastic bag to keep insects off and hang it somewhere dry. If you use a plastic bag, don't seal it—the ham needs to breathe and will spoil if it doesn't get a little air.

If you're not eating ham again anytime soon, vacuum pack it in plastic and freeze it. It should last for a year or longer.

Which Country Hams to Buy

Unlike European dry-cured hams, it's hard to group American country hams into characteristic regions. There are some vague generalizations: eastern Kentucky and North Carolina are known for not smoking their hams, for example, and western Kentuckians are known to rely on smoke to ward off insects, while eastern Kentuckians incorporate plenty of black pepper into their dry rub for the same reason. North Carolinians and Georgians generally like their hams saltier than Kentuckians and

Tennesseans do. But the recipes, usually handed down over generations, can vary wildly from family to family, so that a country ham from Asheville might have more in common with a Murfreesboro or a Surry ham than one made a mile down the road. “It’d be hard to taste whether you were tasting a Missouri ham or one of ours,” Edwards says.

Every ham maker and expert we spoke to said it was best to consider country hams on a producer-by-producer basis. These are among America’s best regarded. Which is best, of course, is up to you. “Some people like 120-proof bourbon, and some people like 80-proof mixed with Pepsi. And they’re both good in their own way,” Edwards says.

Edwards Virginia Smokehouse, Surry, Virginia

One of America’s most beloved ham makers, the ninety-one-year-old Edwards Virginia Smokehouse was devastated by a fire in January 2016, leaving country-ham lovers everywhere bereft. Edwards is working with other ham makers to continue making Edwards-style hams while the family rebuilds, which may take several years.

Sam Edwards III has expanded the family’s lineup to include an impressive breadth of styles and pig breeds while maintaining a consistent quality, coining the term “Surryano” to describe his European-style hams. The most popular Edwards ham is the Wigwam, aged about a year with a brown-sugar glaze and black-pepper crust. “It’s firm and chewy, with intense smoke and black pepper,” says Matthew Rudofker, executive chef of Momofuku Ssäm Bar and Má Pêche.

Arguably the most prized of the Edwards lineup, however, is the peanut-fed Surryano. Edwards lets Berkshires roam peanut fields in a callback to the way Virginia hogs were raised before the industrialized agriculture. The peanut-fed Surryanos are aged for four hundred days, and are known for their richness. “When you slice into them at room temperature, you can literally see the grease coming out,” Edwards says. They’re known for mild to negligible smoke, melt-in-your-mouth suppleness, and that fermented, cheese-like funkiness that country-ham lovers seek out. Not surprisingly,

the peanut-fed Surryano has a “big nutty character to it, like in *ibérico*, but not as rich,” according to Stephen Barber, chef at Farmstead.

Col. Bill Newsom’s Aged Kentucky Country Ham, Princeton, Kentucky

Nancy Newsom, sometimes better known as “the Ham Lady” or “the Colonel’s daughter,” is the grand dame of country hams. The family business just reached its century milestone, and a Newsom ham hangs in the Museo del Jamón in Spain. Newsom’s is noted for hewing strictly to tradition, meaning that its hams are nitrate free, smoked in nineteenth-century iron kettles, and “weather-cured” in rooms open to the elements. The effects can vary even more dramatically than in hams cured in modern facilities, with flavors and textures different from year to year or even ham to ham. In general, Newsom’s hams are somewhat less salty than most other country hams and marked by caramel, minerality, and funkiness.

Broadbent B & B Foods, Kuttawa, Kentucky

Ronny and Beth Drennan bought century-old Broadbent B & B Foods from the Broadbent family in 1999 and have since been awarded national and state awards for their country hams. Broadbent’s honey-rubbed, hickory-smoked Berkshire hams are well balanced, evenly distributed with fat, and mellow. Marc Reyes, meat manager at Eli’s Market in New York City, describes the ten-month Broadbent’s hams as “silky and smooth” in texture, while Rudofker considers the fourteen- to sixteen-month hams to have “less chew, more snap,” calling the product “one of the most well-rounded country hams, with all the elements of sweetness, smokiness, and saltiness without anything being dominated by anything else.”

Benton’s Smoky Mountain Country Hams, Madisonville, Tennessee

Since 1947, the Benton family has been making hams rubbed with brown sugar and salt then aged for nine months or more. They come either unsmoked or hickory smoked. Flavor-wise, they’re aggressive, with less

sweetness and higher salinity, smokiness, and umami, and “that in-your-face barnyard funkiness some people crave,” Rudofker says. The texture can be quite tender. Benton hams can show a lot of variation from season to season.

Burgers’ Smokehouse, California, Missouri

With his relatively young (aged four to six months) Southern Smokehouse Country Ham, Steven Burger has been making an explicit effort to make a product with widespread appeal, especially to Northerners and those turned off by the often-overwhelming saltiness of its competitors. The mildly hickory-smoked hams are excellent for those wanting an accessible introduction, with firm flesh, overall well-rounded flavor, not much funkiness, and just moderate salt that’s tamed by the brown sugar in the rub.

Burgers’ Attic Aged Country Ham, which is not smoked, is aged up to nine months for a more assertive flavor, but is still balanced and relatively mild. It, too, is less salty than other producers’ hams, making it a good choice for those who are new to country hams but curious about the “twang” and complexity that veterans love.

Finchville Farms, Finchville, Kentucky

This unsmoked ham has been made since 1947 with no ingredients besides a rub of red and black pepper, salt, and sugar. It’s a younger ham, which results in a milder meat with solid chew and strong porkiness, along with nutty undertones. It, too, is an excellent selection for beginners. “It’s a good starter ham that won’t blow your socks off with smoke or funk but will give you a good idea of where country ham is going,” Rudofker says.

Lady Edison, Chapel Hill, North Carolina

Lady Edison is a small operation that’s an outgrowth of a barbecue restaurant owned by a UNC math graduate. Its hams are sourced from local pasture-raised hogs of various heritage breeds, rubbed with sea salt and sugar, lightly smoked with hickory, and aged eighteen months. The

hams are mostly distributed to area restaurants and can be difficult to find outside the Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill Triangle area. With the fat broken down so well after a year and a half of hanging, the ham yields buttery, funky, and complex slices that seem to immediately melt on your tongue. Chewing brings out a “parmesan-y, crystalline texture,” as Rudofker puts it.

The Hamery, Murfreesboro, Tennessee

A relative newcomer (it was “only” founded in 1968), the Hamery’s hams are salt cured, smoked with apple and hickory, then aged—their premium “Tennshootoe” hams are aged at least eighteen months. The meat has a meaty chew, and the salinity is balanced well with a little sweetness and smoke.