

Is Ham the New Bacon?

Posted by [Ed Levine](#), July 21, 2009 at 9:00 AM

"There are a number of seriously delicious artisanal hams being made all over this pig-happy country of ours."



That is the porcine question of the day. It all started with Italian prosciutto di Parma, progressed to Serrano ham from Spain, and then of course moved to the *ne plus ultra* of European ham, the black-footed (*patenegra* in Spanish), called Jamon Iberico. But now American artisanal ham makers are getting in on the act. **Herb and Kathy Eckhouse** started making extraordinary [La Quercia](#) prosciutto in Des Moines, Iowa. How extraordinary? Italian chefs in America who worship at the feet of Parma ham like **Mario Batali** started taking notice.

Now third generation curemaster **Sam Edwards** working with [Heritage Foods USA](#) and [Newman Berkshire Farms](#) and has given birth to what can only be described as country ham and prosciutto's love child. It's called **Surryano** (Edwards is in Surry, Virginia, where "ano" refers to Serrano), and according to [Harold McGee's piece in the New York Times](#), it sounds pretty heavenly:

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? 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.

"The intense, silken essence of meat." Wow! When **Harold McGee** waxes rhapsodic, it's definitely time to taste this ham. So I was thinking that I would order some when out of the blue, a messenger showed up at Serious Eats World HQ with a cute plastic-wrapped portion of Surryano ham. **Ham-a-Ileujah**, the Serious Eaters all said.

The Surryano ham is:

- Hickory-smoked

- Aged more than 400 days
- From pure-bred Berkshire pork for ideal marbling, richer flavor
- 100% pasture-raised under certified humane conditions
- No antibiotics, no added hormones

But is it seriously delicious?



We took the ham out of the fridge, then out of the plastic. We let the ham breathe (I know it sounds pretentious) and then put it on a [Sullivan Street Bakery](#) baguette called a *stirrato*. No condiments touched this ham, no mustard, no olive oil, no butter, no mayo, no nuthin'.

It might be the best American ham sandwich ever

And it didn't need any of them. The Surryano ham was world-class seriously delicious: porky, nutty, salty, sweet, smoky, fatty, meat-tastic. It might be the best American ham sandwich ever; no check that, it is the best American ham sandwich ever. Actually, I can't make such a definitive statement.

There are a number of seriously delicious artisanal hams being made all over this pig-happy country of ours. I have now decided that we must taste each and every one of them at Serious Eats World HQ in the coming days and weeks. Just this morning I got off the phone with **Herb Eckhouse** ordering some fairly recent additions to his line of wondrous pig products.

When we have concluded our American artisanal ham tour by mail, we will know for sure if ham has become the new bacon. Until then, as we've said before on Serious Eats, praise the lard, praise the lard.

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12 Comments:

Ed, have you had Yunnan ham? It's a Chinese delicacy but I've never found it in the U.S. It's comparable to a good Serrano ham but maybe even saltier. One of my favorite breakfasts as a kid was Yunnan ham and honey sandwiches on Wonderbread--I bet you'd dig it.

[Michele Humes](#) at [9:17AM on 07/21/09](#)

That ham sounds so good I would like to wear it for a hat!

[redfish](#) at [10:15AM on 07/21/09](#)

I've never heard of Yunnan ham, Michele Humes! In fact, it's kind of ironic because I was just about to say that most of the pork I saw during my trip to China wasn't nearly so dainty as the prosciutto and such pictured here. Maybe I was simply looking in the wrong places!

Or maybe the enormous ham hocks and pigs feet (sold in sizes that rivaled a baby's head!) were simply too imposing to ignore! :)

On the other hand, what does "letting ham breathe" do for it?

[Takat](#) at [10:15AM on 07/21/09](#)

@Takat I would imagine that letting ham "breathe" outside the fridge allows the fat in the meat to come to room temperature and be unctuous.

[Michele Humes](#) at [10:34AM on 07/21/09](#)

I've tried the Surryano ham (I bought it from Heritage Foods, though I think if you buy direct it's cheaper). It's quite good, and it's great to cook with as well. It's odd that they want to liken it to Serrano; isn't Serrano not smoked at all?

Hunan ham is delicious, but of an entirely different character. It's illegal in the US I believe.

[darkestcloud](#) at [11:16AM on 07/21/09](#)

now i LOVE love LOVE love pork. bacon, pork chops, pig feet, pork rinds...you name it! but ham? ham is truly disgusting.

since the day i heard that myth about putting it in cocacola and worms come out... i haven't been able to enjoy a thanksgiving ham

[akapluto](#) at [11:18AM on 07/21/09](#)

Nice! I just bought a [bone-in Surryano](#) for my boyfriend's birthday, to compare it against last year's birthday Redondo Serrano from Spain.

We're just waiting to have a critical mass over to justify splitting the puppy open ;).

[Tam Ngo](#) at [11:46AM on 07/21/09](#)

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