The New Frontier of *Country* HAM

by Logan Ward

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
PETER FRANK EDWARDS

How a third-generation ham master in Virginia took a cue from old-world Europe and reinvented the South's most humble pork product

The Ham Maestro
Sam Edwards III with a Surryano ham. Opposite: A Wigwam in the aging room.

In 1991, a Virginia chef named Jimmy Sneed gave a seven-pound Wigwam country ham to a globe-trotting hairstylist. Sneed thought the ham would make a distinctive house gift for his friend, who had been invited to spend the holidays at the Aspen home of Rafaella De Laurentiis, daughter of the renowned film producer Dino De Laurentiis. A Southern delicacy, the Wigwam had been lovingly dry-cured and smoked by S. Wallace Edwards & Sons, a revered third-generation company across the James River from Jamestown. Unbeknownst to Sneed, the ham came with cooking instructions: Soak overnight, add fresh water, simmer eight hours, remove skin, trim fat, glaze with brown sugar, and bake for thirty minutes at three hundred degrees. The Wigwam, which is especially long with a boomerang curve at the knuckle, wouldn't fit in De Laurentiis's biggest pot. So the houseguest drove to a hardware store, bought a saw, cut the hock off, and simmered the ham for a day, flooding the posh villa with the reek of boiled salt pork. To Sneed, though, the odor was merely evidence of a sacrilege: boiling away the nuanced flavors and textures painstakingly achieved only after months of salt-pampering, smoking, and patience. You might as well heat up a skillet and scramble caviar.

"This is one of the most glorious dried prosciutto-style hams I'd ever tasted in my life," recalls Sneed, who trained under the late Jean-Louis Palladin, whom some considered the greatest French chef in America. "All he needed to do was shave it. When he told me the story, I went crazy."

A few months later, the chef retold the story while addressing a crowd of foodies at a Julia Child–sponsored event in Washington, D.C. Just as Sneed lifted the cotton sack that had held the meat, Sam Wallace Edwards III, scion of the family business that had cured the ham in question, entered the room.

"These are the morons," said Sneed, pointing to the Edwards label, "who put cooking instructions on a dry-cured ham."

It is possible to look back on this encounter as marking a kind of shift in the illustrious history of a humble Southern classic—a recognition that country ham, that salty mainstay of Huddle House menus, might deserve more adoration than just something destined to be served with redeye gravy or slapped between two halves of a buttermilk biscuit. Today, thanks to a renewed appreciation for regional American foods, country ham is enjoying a comeback, bouncing back from an unmistakable decline. A handful of cure masters, farmers, and chefs are redefining and garnering new respect for it, while reviving cherished traditions. Now the backwoods staple is just as likely to show up dry-shaved, prosciutto-style, in white-tablecloth restaurants in New York and San Francisco as it is tucked between dinner rolls at a wedding reception in Richmond.

This shift did not happen overnight, however. Despite their inauspicious first meeting, Edwards and Sneed eventually became friends. But for years the cure master ignored the gregarious chef's good-natured rebukes about cooking instructions on hams. For one thing, federal law at the time required raw hams, even fully cured ones, to come with cooking instructions. And besides, Edwards's family was in the country ham business, thank you very much, and country ham was meant to be skillet-fried. Then one day about ten years ago, Tim Harris, a Williamsburg, Virginia, importer of gourmet foods from Spain, offered Edwards a taste of a dry-cured, acorn-fattened Iberico ham. At the time, Edwards was charging $75 for a whole Wigwam ham, his company's finest offering. Harris's Ibericos were bringing $1,500. Each.

When the wafer-thin slice of meat known as black gold hit Edwards's tongue, Chef Sneed's know-it-all remonstrations finally made sense.

That, Edwards thought, is nothing but fancy country ham.

The Turning Point

According to the strictest definition of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, a country ham is a hind leg of a pig, aged at least seventy days. The differences between American country ham and Spanish Iberico or Serrano ham or Italian prosciutto are subtle. They mostly have to do with what a pig ate, whether the meat was smoked, and how a ham is sliced. Serrano refers to the highland region where these famous Spanish hams are made; the word means "mountain" in Spanish. Iberico hams come from black Iberian pigs from southern Spain and are known for their high fat content. Most American country hams come from pigs raised on corn. And the famous Italian Prosciutto di Parma is dry-cured ham from the Parma region of Tuscany, where farmers often fatten the pigs on cheese curds.

Modern life, however, has not been kind to the American COUNTRY HAM.

Why does anyone dry-cure a ham in the first place? Think of a country ham as the porcine equivalent of beef jerky or dried apples. Salt-curing removes water until there's not enough moisture left for microbes to grow in the meat, a vital step in the days before refrigeration. With the advent of refrigeration came "city hams," the tender, spiral-sliced versions you see anchoring holiday sideboards. City hams get wet-cured, pumped full of brine and then boiled or lightly smoked. Because they can go from fresh to ready-to-eat in just a few days, they're cheaper to produce. But a country-cured ham, though rendered unnecessary by refrigeration, simply tastes better.

Modern life, however, has not been kind to the American country ham. Starting after World War II, industrial processors gobbled up family curing houses. To cut costs, large plants compressed the dry-curing process, whittling it down to the USDA's seventy-day minimum, even though hams traditionally cured for at least six months. By the late twentieth century, the price of country ham dove to 99 cents a pound. What had once been the pride of the Southern table became a supermarket loss leader. Fresh out of the University of Richmond with a business degree in the late 1970s, Sam Edwards worked his tail off navigating those currents—making deals and cutting prices, only to see his company's margins get thinner, while profits didn't budge. He soon faced a choice: cut corners on quality; go out of business, like dozens of family-owned curing companies around the South; or veer off in a completely different direction. "Ever since then," Edwards says, "I've been going the other way."

Edwards realized that there was only one way he could compete against the big players, who were doing to pork what Perdue did to poultry: He needed to appeal to a clientele who would pay more for artisanal meats. Back in 1983, he urged his skeptical father to buy

Food styling: Cynthia Groseclose

The Old-Fashioned Fried slices of classic country ham slapped between biscuits

Close Shave
A plateful of Surryano ham sliced thin and ready to serve

booth space at the national Fancy Foods Show. The very name was off-putting to a hardworking ham man from rural Virginia, and for a long time the father sat on the fence. The flip of a coin settled it, thus beginning an annual trek to the specialty foods show and the transition to the ancient art of high-quality, raw-shaved meats.

"I think Sam was a visionary in that he understood that only one guy wins the price game," says Patrick Martins, the founder of Slow Food U.S.A. and owner of a Brooklyn-based company that sells humanely raised, hormone-free meats. "So you either try to be that guy or you try to add value and quality. That takes guts."

Therein lies the new twist in the old story of country ham. The current passion for all foods local and slow is helping swing the pendulum away from shortcuts and cheap hams, and producers like Edwards—along with Nancy Newsom in Kentucky and Allan Benton in Tennessee—are getting their day in the sun. "I don't know that there is a technology," says Martins, "that does what Sam does."

Full Circle

ON A HOT DAY LAST SEPTEMBER, I OPENED A DOOR AND stepped into winter. I was in Surry in rural southeastern Virginia, following Edwards on a tour of his family's pork-processing plant. The fifty-four-year-old Edwards is a tall man with a big frame, a jowly face, and a bushy gray walrus mustache. He looks like a guy who would cure hams, but he talks like a stockbroker and drives a Lexus SUV with vanity plates that read VA HAM. Winter was a walk-in refrigerator covered in a thick slurry of salt that looked like dirty snow on a city street. Inside, where the mercury hovered at forty degrees, sat fresh hams heaped with salt and piled low on pallets.

To make classic country ham, modern-day commercial curers re-create the changing seasons under a roof, unlike Edwards's grandfather, who filled tall, square curing houses with meat and let Mother Nature do her thing. At the Edwards plant, after thirty days in a winter room, standard country hams move to a spring room, where they spend two to three weeks at fifty degrees. Summer begins in a windowless, hickory-smoke-choked, cinder-block chamber, where hams hang for a week, hock down, in net bags called stockinettes. After that, they spend at least three months in an aging room, suspended from tall pinewood racks. Wigwam hams, on the other hand, spend at least a year aging, giving them a silky texture and complex flavors and making them indefinitely shelf stable.

After tasting his first $1,500 Iberico and accompanying his friend the importer on a ham-sampling tour of Spain, Edwards set out to improve upon his grandfather's signature ham. Instead of buying conventional pork, he began ordering the meat of Berkshire pigs, a heritage breed that resembles the Iberico and is beloved for its fat-marbled flesh. Edwards's reasoning was simple: "If you put butter in a recipe, half a stick makes it taste good, but two sticks make it even better." The pigs came from Patrick Martins, who had contracted with Missouri farmers to raise the Berkshires humanely and without hormones or antibiotics. While the farmers sent tenderloins overnight to celebrity chefs in New York and other cities, they shipped the hams to Edwards. Instead of six or even twelve months, Edwards ages these special hams for up to eighteen months, taking them through two summer sweats until they become dense and dry and intensely flavorful. The high fat content of the Berkshires makes the longer aging possible. He calls his new high-dollar product Surryano ham, a playful combination of Surry and Serrano.

Inside the Surryano aging room, the thick air smelled sweet and sour and smoky all at once, like a bacon-sizzling Sunday morning intensified a hundred times over—the same smell Edwards's baby sister used to assume was their father's cologne. Thousands of hams hung like giant mahogany chrysalises. The skin glistened as their weight pushed diamonds of flesh through the net bags. According to a handwritten date on the tag, the ham hit the salt in July 2009, making it more than thirteen months old, with more time needed before it could be sold whole for $180, in four-ounce packages for $9 apiece, or in minimalist arrangements for $5 per ounce at David Chang's Momofuku Ssäm Bar in Manhattan, one of many upmarket restaurants where the ham ends up.

Edwards's most recent experiments involve hams from an expensive Polish breed called the Mangalitsa, a woolly pig whose ability to fatten up outpaces even the Berkshire. Edwards is also shipping Virginia peanuts to the Missouri farmers raising his Berkshires, to fatten them the old-fashioned way. Before factory farmers raised pigs in cramped metal cages, Virginians released free-roaming pigs into peanut fields after the harvest to root up leftovers. "What I'm doing is identical to the way my grandfather did it," Edwards said.

"My father and grandfather were sticklers for the details of what we do," he added, before driving an ice pick into the heart of a ham, removing it, and sniffing the end. "We use sense of smell and touch and eyesight and taste to tell if hams are ready." Friends and regular clients would ask his grandfather to pick a special ham, and he would mark those with a blue crayon. Though the business has grown since then—it sells fifty thousand hams a year—Edwards still considers it small compared with the industrial food giants. "I don't carry a blue crayon," he says, "but if you called me and said your daughter was getting married, I might still pick a ham for you."

After we left the Surryano room, we approached a table where a woman was slicing Surryano hams for packaging. Edwards handed me a slice. It was delicious—salty and smoky, with an apple-like sweetness and the earthy aftertaste of an aged cheese. "All I want," he said, "is for people to try our ham and taste the difference." ⓖ

Ham for the Holidays

The best thing about a twenty-first-century country ham is that it can arrive overnight. Four of the South's finest curing houses offer both classic and prosciutto-style dry-cured hams by mail.

1. Benton's Smoky Mountain Country Hams
Cured in salt and brown sugar, Benton's classic country hams age for nine to ten months, while its domestic prosciutto remains dangling for twelve to eighteen months. *bentonshams.com*

2. Johnston County
This sixty-three-year-old company, located in Smithfield, North Carolina, is run by second-generation cure master Rufus Brown. He sells classic unsmoked country ham and prosciutto, whole and in slices. *countrycuredhams.com*

3. Newsom's Country Hams
Started in Princeton, Kentucky, by H. C. Newsom in 1917, the company is now run by Nancy Newsom Mahaffey. Though Newsom's still sells plenty of whole classic country hams for cooking, the company has also begun selling a more finely crafted prosciutto. *newsomscountryham.com*

4. S. Wallace Edwards & Sons.
Like his grandfather and father, Sam Edwards wants you to taste the difference between his hams and those that are mass-produced. Thanks to his variety of products—from whole Wigwam hams to vacuum-packed slices of Surryano ham, made from 100 percent Berkshire pork—you can. *surryfarms.com*