

cigar aficionado

THE GOOD LIFE MAGAZINE FOR MEN

www.cigaraficionado.com

**TOP CARS
OF THE YEAR**

**MIAMI'S NEW
CIGAR
FACTORIES**

**FRED
THOMPSON**

**A CIGAR-LOVING
TENNESSEE
GENTLEMAN**

**TOUGH TIMES
ON THE
PGA TOUR**

**100-POINT
CLASSIC CIGAR**

APRIL 2009

\$5.95 U.S.



0 4 >



Spring Ham

Why does a pig's hind leg often grace an Easter table? Samuel W. Edwards III, whose family has been curing ham in Surry, Virginia, since 1926, tags tradition to timing and technology: before refrigeration, pigs were slaughtered in December and January, cured in cold weather, and "by March or April they were relatively corned," he says, adding, "The Easter flavor profile is fresh and mild."

While mechanized cooling now allows any type of ham in any season, Edwards notes that the taste of the traditional Easter ham is so popular that he replicates it in his "King of City Hams." (To Southerners, wet cured—brine and spices infused—hams are "city" hams and dry cured are "country.")

However, true levels of connoisseurship begin with a longer aged (six months), dry cured ham, according to Gregg Rentfrow, a ham fancier and meat science professor at the University of Kentucky. With a rub of salt and sugar and optional smoking—hickory, apple or cherry wood—natural refrigeration is ideal.

A dry cured, long-aged (up to 18 months) country ham might just be the ultimate natural food. Edwards explains that the curing process slows down the water activity within the meat to the point where

pathogens can't survive. The hams require no cooking. Rentfrow describes the flavor as the "redneck cousin to prosciutto."

Unlike the typical boiled ham, the uncooked variety needs to soak for a couple of days to remove the salt cure. But with an extremely long-aged ham, no cooking is necessary. It's ready to slice thinner than paper and serve at room temperature.

Of course, a ham is only as good as the pig it's cut from. Edwards buys free-range (instead of indoor-raised, mass-produced animals) Berkshire pigs from around the Southeast. Chuck Talbott, a West Virginia hog farmer with a doctorate in animal breeding, describes Berkshires as having higher levels of intramuscular fat. "The flavor is taken up in the fat and magic happens."

Diet is key. In fact, the Smithfield Ham variety specifies peanut-fed pigs by law. Talbott, who raises Ossabaw and Old Farmers' Hybrids, uses a varied regimen. During spring, they eat barley and rape. In summer it is pumpkins, corn and sunflowers and "in the fall they're fattened on acorns in the forest along with soybeans and sorghum-sudan grass."

Visit virginiatraditions.com and finchvillefarms.com.

—Warren Kalbacker