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# Home Curing Bacon for a Mild Flavor

**Maurice A. Alexander**  
Department of Animal Science

**William C. Stringer**  
Department of Food Science and Nutrition

Most people eat bacon because they like it, not for its nutritional value. Country-cured bacon is usually more salty and less desirable than commercially prepared bacon. This guide will outline procedures for curing bacon to get a mild flavor.

When production of bacon depends upon natural conditions for refrigeration, pork bellies should be placed in cure during December through February. The risk of spoilage is greater during the warmer seasons of fall and spring.

## Product

To successfully home cure bacon, begin with fresh bellies that have been chilled to about 42 degrees Fahrenheit within 24 to 30 hours after slaughter. If the fresh bellies are purchased from a commercial source, they have been properly chilled. If the source is farm slaughter, take care to chill them rapidly. Do not stack warm bellies during the chilling process. Trim the bellies to desired shape and apply cure within 48 hours after slaughter. Bellies prepared from skinned carcasses may be cured successfully in the same manner as those from scalded carcasses.

## Curing ingredients

Salt is the primary ingredient. Sugar is added to offset some of the salt's harshness. A combination of 3 pounds salt and 1-1/2 pounds sugar, either white or brown, is a basic mixture. There are several commercially prepared cures comprised of this basic mixture. Some have added spices and flavoring to give a characteristic flavor, aroma or appearance.

A cure mixture that performs well under home curing conditions consists of 7 pounds meat curing salt, 4 pounds sugar (white or brown) and 3 ounces of nitrate (saltpeter — optional). This cure produces a mild-flavored bacon.

## Applying cure

If commercially prepared cure is used, apply according to the manufacturer's instructions. If you prepare your cure according to the suggested recipe, apply the cure at rate of 1/2 ounce per pound fresh belly. If you cannot weigh the ingredients and bellies, you can put the cure on by sprinkling the skin side and by rubbing the sides and inside well with the cure. Hold the belly on edge and tap gently on table to remove excess cure. The amount applied will equal about 1/2 ounce per pound.

## Curing time

Stack the bellies crisscross no more than four layers deep on a table that is tilted to allow the moisture to drain away. Plywood on a set of sawhorses works well. Place the bellies in a well-ventilated, odor-free room and allow to cure 7 days. If the bellies freeze before 7 days, allow them to defrost and add one day to cure for each day they were frozen. After curing, the product should be smoked.

## Preparation for smoking

Wash the bacon in warm water, hang in the smokehouse with door open and allow to dry. This may take two or three days. The meat will not take smoke until the surface is dry. If the meat is smoked when still damp, the smoke will be smudgy and the meat will not taste as good. When the bacon is dry, apply the smoke and allow about 36 to 48 hours to complete the smoking. Add sawdust or wood as needed during the smoking.

## Smokehouse

A smokehouse may be constructed using three pieces of tempered masonite, stove pipe, a 30-gallon drum and frame lumber.

The outside dimensions are about 2 feet wide, 4 feet deep and 8 feet tall. This will smoke the bacons and jowls from five hogs.

Smoke from burning sawdust in the drum is vented into a lower corner of the smokehouse, then vented out the opposite corner near the top of a flue.

The drum should lay on a metal base with about 2 feet of 3- or 4-inch vent pipe to the smokehouse. Air vents should be made in the drum on the side opposite the vent pipe and about one-fourth the distance up from the bottom. Cut a hole in the top to allow filling with sawdust.

Start the smoke generator by putting crumpled paper in the lower vents, piling sawdust on the paper and lighting the paper. Leave enough room for air to get in as the sawdust burns. The sawdust should smolder and give off smoke. If it flames, dampen the sawdust with water.

## Bacon hangers

Bacon hangers can be made of non-resinous wood material about 2-inches wide, 1/2-inch thick, and 12-inches long. Space four or five number 6 galvanized nails along the board, make a hanger from number 9 galvanized wire and fasten to the middle of the board.

## Source of wood for smoke

Use only hardwood sawdust or chips for smoking. Resinous evergreen wood will impart an undesirable flavor.

Sawdust from a stave bolt mill or sawmill where no resinous lumber is cut will be fine.

Since most home smokehouses are designed to give a cold smoke, drying and smoking will take longer than at a commercial facility.

## Handling the finished product

Bacon cured and smoked in this fashion is perishable and needs to be frozen or stored in a refrigerator until eaten. Remove the rind if it is not removed during slaughter, slice, wrap in freezer paper and freeze. The sliced bacon will retain its quality 2 to 3 months in freezer storage. If more bacon was cured than the family will eat in two to three months, wrap and freeze in chunks. Bacon will keep its fresh flavor longer during freezer storage if it is not sliced.

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