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Country Curing Hams

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Many people like the flavor of ham that has been cured country style. Its characteristic flavor is quite different from mild-cured commercial hams.

Time to Cure

When production of country cured hams is dependent on natural conditions for refrigeration, hams should be placed in cure during December and January. This will help insure production of sound cured and aged hams which will have acquired their characteristic flavor and aroma by midsummer. Unless mechanical refrigeration is available, hams should not be placed in cure after January. Thirty to 40 days of cool weather (less than 40°F night temperature) is needed, depending on the size of the hams, to prevent spoilage.

The Fresh Product

To successfully cure hams country style, begin with fresh hams that have been chilled to about 40°F within 24 to 30 hours after slaughter. If the source of hams is a commercial packing plant, this requirement is usually met; however, if the source of hams is farm slaughter, take care to chill the carcasses as rapidly as possible. Regardless of the source, apply cure within 48 hours after slaughter. Before the cure is added, trim the hams of excess fat and bevel to the desired shape, being careful not to expose any more lean than necessary.

Curing Ingredients

Salt is the primary curing agent. Sugar is added to offset some of the harshness of the salt. Other ingredients, such as black pepper, red pepper, and ground cloves, are sometimes added to give a characteristic flavor, aroma, and color. Saltpeter (potassium nitrate) is traditionally used to aid in

color development, flavor, and preservation. However, at this time (January, 1980), the use of nitrates and nitrites is under scrutiny by the U. S. Department of Agriculture due to the detection of some carcinogenic compounds in meat products cured with nitrates and nitrites. The amounts allowable could possibly be reduced, or their use could be prohibited entirely.

A basic curing mixture is as follows:

- 2 lbs. of salt (non-iodized)
- 1 lb. of sugar (white or brown)
- 1 oz. saltpeter (optional)
- Mix thoroughly. (This is enough for two 19 to 20 pound hams).

Commercial curing mixtures are available at some grocery stores or farm supply centers. The mixtures are similar to the mixture above but may have some added flavoring. These commercial mixtures should be used according to the manufacturers' directions.

Applying the Curing Mixture

The basic curing mixture should be applied at the rate of 1¼ ounces per pound of ham. Two methods are commonly used in applying the cure mixture.

Single Application. All the cure is applied at one time with this method. Apply most of the mixture to the lean surfaces with only a small sprinkling on the skin side. Take special care to get some cure into the hock. Rubbing all the mixture into the ham is not necessary. Apply the mixture uniformly to the face of the ham.

Then wrap the ham in a non-waxed paper (such as brown kraft) and place in a cloth bag or stockinette (these are commercially available in some locations). Wrap the paper around the hams so that no surface is exposed and the curing mixture is held in place.

After placing in a stockinette or cloth bag, hang the ham

shank down in a well ventilated area. We do not recommend moist areas like basements and cellars.

Allow the hams to cure 2½ days per pound of ham. If the hams freeze during curing, allow one additional day for each day they are frozen.

Two Applications. This method splits the applications with ¾ ounce per pound of ham applied initially and the remaining ½ ounce per pound (initial weight) applied seven days later. Follow the procedure for applying the mixture described for a single application, except that the hams should be placed on a clean shelf or table during the time between the two applications. After the second application, the hams should be wrapped and bagged as described for a single application.

Preparation for Aging

Unwrap and remove excessive cure; then re-wrap. During the aging process, check hams weekly for insect damage until end of June.

Smoking

In Missouri, most country cured hams are not smoked; however, some people desire the smoked flavor and color. For smoking, the hams should be unwrapped after the curing time. Any excess curing mixture remaining on the ham as well as mold growth should be removed by brushing with a stiff brush and rinsing with cold water. Hams should be smoked in such a way that heat does not exceed 85 to 90°F. Hardwood logs or sawdust should be used as the source of smoke. Don't use resinous woods, such as evergreens, for smoking. After smoking, the hams should be re-wrapped and hung for aging as described earlier.

General Protective Measures

Cured hams must be protected from insects and rodents. Insects live on the meat trimmings left on the floor of the smoke house. The floor, tables, and shelves should be

scrubbed well with soap and hot water. The doors and windows should be screened with 32 mesh screen and all cracks sealed.

However, if the hams are completely wrapped so that the entire ham is covered with paper as described, the insect-proof storage area is not necessary. No insecticide is approved for spraying or brushing on the meat or on table tops or meat shelves where meat is likely to contact. Therefore, good sanitation is essential in all phases of ham curing. Hams should be examined at least monthly for insect or rodent damage.

Preparation for Showing

If the ham is to be shown in a fair or otherwise displayed prepare it as follows: After aging, unwrap and remove any excess cure and mold growth. This may be done either by washing in warm water and blotting dry or by using a stiff bristled brush followed by rubbing with a cloth or sponge dampened with vinegar.

When the ham is cleaned, remove the part of the aitch bone that is above the meat surface. Also, appearance will be improved if about one inch is sawed off the shank. Some other trimming may be desirable to improve the overall appearance. Rub the entire ham with a very light coat of vegetable oil. If desired, a light covering of paprika may be applied.

Cooking Country Ham

Once the ham is aged, properly prepare the ham for cooking by removing excess cure and any mold that occurred during aging. The two common methods of cooking country ham are frying and baking.

To fry, the ham should be sliced approximately ¼-inch thick. Cook slowly and turn often. Don't overcook. If ham is unusually lean, some fat may be added to the skillet. Some people prefer to fry the center slices and bake the shank and butt portions.

To bake a whole ham or the portions, simmer (not boil) in water for 20 to 25 minutes per pound of ham. Take out of water, remove the skin, place in roasting pan with fat side up and bake uncovered in 275°F oven until the internal temperature is 155°F. A pineapple-clove garnish or other garnishes or glazes may be used on the ham during or after baking.