

Headline: Taking the CURE // cured meats // No baloney: Today's cured-pork products are better than ever.

Date: 01/18/07

Section: TASTE

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As a nation, we long have prided ourselves on "living high on the hog." But only very recently have we begun to do so in a literal sense.

Where once only a few run-of-the-mill bacons, sausages and hams adorned our food shelves, now we find prosciutto and chorizo and finocchiona and scores of other delectable cured-pork products.

We finally have discovered that "there's nothing like a salty piece of pig," as chef Robert Moore of Heartland in St. Paul, so plain-spokenly puts it.

Cured meats have been around since the early-B.C. days of the Egyptians and Chinese. Over the centuries, Europeans, and particularly Italians, have perfected many ways of preserving every part and parcel of our porcine friends (and sometimes their bovine and equine counterparts).

But for the most part, only the most rudimentary of these products - whole-hog sausages, picnic hams, mass-produced bacons - made it to America's tables, largely because strict laws forbade the importing of most cured meats.

Over the last few decades, though, the foodie movement has brought with it an appreciation and demand for specially made hams, bacons and sausages. A slight loosening of import and safety laws and the influx of chorizo-making immigrants have contributed as well.

The raw and the cooked

Among the results: more charcuterie plates in restaurants; a surfeit of sausages both fresh (lamb-wild rice-blueberry, anyone?) and dry-cured (speck, culatello, mortadella and the like), and a raft of recipes featuring these meats as stars or, more often, as complementary components or flavor-enhancers. As a friend noted, "You can take someone who hates Brussels sprouts, and cook the sprouts in some really good bacon, and he'll lap 'em up."

The culinary possibilities are limitless: A salad that once might have been topped with uber-processed bacon "bits" might now boast a sprinkle of prosciutto "bites." The bacon wrapped around a shrimp or sea scallop could be Nueske's rather than Corn King. The sausage in that pasta sauce may have come from a wild, acorn-eating boar rather than a factory-farm, no-telling-what-it-was-fed hog.

In a sense, this trend reflects the Slow Food movement, which favors artisan-made items over mass-produced ones. Like many of the more popular cured meats, this movement originated in Italy. So perhaps it's no coincidence that two Americans of Italian descent, renowned Bay Area restaurateur Paul Bertolli and Armandino Batali (father of super-chef Mario Batali), are at the forefront of the "salumi" revolution. Their dry-cured sausages, available locally (see related story), are made the old-school way.

As are the goods from sources closer to home. The lean, hearty (and yummy) Thielen bacon is made in Pierz, Minn. At meat markets around town, from longtime stalwarts such as Forster's and Kramarczuk's to relative newbies such as Clancey's, the display cases and freezers are packed with handmade sausages both exotic

and traditional. And of course, Italian markets such as Broders', Cossetta's and Buon Giorno are larded with guanciale, soppressetta and exotic hams from near and far.

A pretty penny for pork

A lot of this stuff isn't cheap. Some bacons cost two or three times as much as Oscar Mayer, the good prosciuttos can approach \$30 a pound and one Batali delicacy, culatello, fetches a whopping \$5.50 an ounce at Broders'.

"It is outrageously expensive. It shocks me," said owner Molly Broder. "But it's worth it if you know how good this kind of thing can be. Batali is using only the best ingredients, heritage pork products. And he's combining his family's traditional methods and our own terroir the flavor from the land and air, giving it the taste of Washington state where Batali lives.

"He's doing for salami what has been happening the last 10 years in America with cheese, making artisan products that can compete with anything in the world," Broder said.

Greg Westersteen, who makes a variety of sausage and other cured-pork products at Clancey's, is on board with the movement. "It's really catching on," he said. "People want better products. Using quality animals rather than a commodity product, putting fresh chopped herbs and garlic rather than dried stuff, that makes a big difference. It's what people are coming to want and expect."