

Chuckwagon's "Pistolero's Prosciutto" Italian Prosciutto Ham (Injected - Dry-Cured) 25 lb. Recipe

Dry-curing prosciutti requires selection, cutting, trimming, salting, curing, overhauling, equalizing, resting, smoking, and drying. (Whew!) A prosciutto ham is made from a hog's rear leg and it should be cured and treated according to the FSIS - USDA rules, or "certified" free from *Trichinella Spiralis*.

The Procedure:

A salt and nitrate/nitrite mixture is applied to the surface, the meat is laid in a bed of salt, and then more salt is added on top. It is this salt, added initially, that serves as the only protection against various spoilage and pathogenic bacteria until the Aw (water activity) drops to a safe level below 0.85. Salt, during the primary days of curing, speedily removes moisture from a ham. The extracted liquid will dissolve most of the salt and settle in the bottom of the container unless we drill holes for draining, or place hams on slanted draining tables. The meat absorbs some of the remaining salt, but more is added about halfway through the curing process. The law requires that hams be turned over (overhauled) during the process to ensure equal distribution of the salt-cure. Depending upon the relative humidity and the size of a ham, equalizing requires from 30 to 60 days. Having been rinsed and brushed, a ham is either hung inside a bag or placed on a shelf for the final equalization process as the relative humidity slowly continues to be reduced. As the residual salt contained in the cells of the meat supports further evaporation, the meat finally becomes bacteriologically stable. This resting and equalization period is necessary for the development of proper flavor and color - both naturally occurring reactions inside the meat and fat.

Whenever making a ham at home, it is strongly recommended that drying or smoking the product remains below 60° F (16° C.) as *staphylococcus aureus* (a pathogenic bacterium) begins to grow quickly. Cold smoke may be applied three or four hours each day for two weeks. Besides giving the ham a terrific flavor, smoking also discourages bacterial and mold growth on the surface of the ham. Airflow, relative humidity, and temperature have an effect upon drying and each must be controlled, monitored, and even recorded.

The thickness of the meat, the skin and subcutaneous fat, the amount of intramuscular fat, and the remaining water content deep inside the ham, all affect the duration of the drying process. The acquisition of desired (white) mold suppresses the growth of undesirable organisms such as pathogenic and spoilage bacteria, yeasts, and indigenous, undesired, molds of various colors. It also has a positive effect on the drying process by preventing the emergence of "dry rim". Yet, some people believe it hinders evaporation by obstructing surface pores and choose to use one of the oldest methods of slowing the drying process - simply rubbing the ham with lard. As dry curing draws moisture from a ham, it is usually reduced by 20 – 25%, thus intensifying its flavor.

- 2- hams (12-13 lbs. each)
- 1 lb. non-iodized salt (1-1/2 cups)
- 5 tblspns. Prague Powder Cure #2
- 1 cup powdered dextrose

Optional:

- 1 cup white pepper
- 5 tblspns. black pepper
- 1 cup allspice
- 5 tblspns. nutmeg
- 3 tblspns. powdered mustard
- 3 tblspns. coriander

Remove the bones but do not remove the skins from the hams. If you are only curing a half-ham, choose the shank end as the bone is much easier to remove (with less damage to the meat). Locate two clean wooden boards for pressing the ham, giving it its traditional “flattened” shape. You’ll need to place twice as much weight of the hams on the boards to press it correctly. Shucks pards, I just use a bag of old rusty horseshoes!

Please note that a beginner’s most common mistake is adding too many spices and too much salt. Many say that the best hams are simply cured with salt and freshly cracked black pepper. However, if you are using spices, blend them together using a mechanical mixer. Measure out three ounces (3 oz.) of this mixture and place it in a bowl. Add a pound of salt (1-1/2 cups) and 5 tablespoons of Cure #2 to the spice mixture and mix it thoroughly. Store the remaining mixture in a cool, dry place inside a sealed container for later use. Using half the curing mixture, rub the hams well, over the entire surface area and into crevices. Wrap the ham in butcher paper and place it into a draining lug.

The hams are placed in a cooler ten days at as near 38° F. (3° C.) as possible. Temperatures above that mark will enable “bone sour” to occur. Temperatures below that point will hinder the curing process. Be sure to cover the hams to keep out as much air as possible. Exposure to the air will dry the meat excessively and affect the final product.

Overhaul the ham after ten days. Pour off any liquid and rub the hams again with the remaining “spice-cure mixture”. Cover the hams again and allow them to cure another 45 days. Finally, remove the hams, brush off the salt rinse them, and place them into a bath of cool water (not more than 65° F. (18°C.) for 24 hours, changing the water after the first 8 hours. Hang the hams up to dry, making sure all the surface salt is gone.

If you are going to hot-smoke the hams, place them into a pre-heated smokehouse at 130° F. (54°C.) when they are dry. Hold this temperature for 48 hours. Next, raise the smokehouse temperature to 140° F. (60° C.) and hold it there for two more hours. To complete the process, raise the smokehouse temperature only a few degrees every fifteen or twenty minutes until the smokehouse temperature reaches 170° F. (77° C.). Sustain this temperature for two additional hours, finally dropping the smokehouse temperature to 120° F. (49° C.) for yet an additional eight hours.

Finally, rub the prosciutti with plenty of freshly-cracked black pepper and place them in a drying room at room-temperature (72°F.) in 75% relative humidity, decreasing the humidity by 10% over the next month. Is it worth all the hassle? Is it worth the waiting? Cut a thin slice for a sandwich, add just a hint of mustard, some onion, and decide for yourself!

Best Wishes,
Chuckwagon