

Hog wild

Chefs embrace quick-cured hams that reduce time, space requirements **BY BRET THORN**

Chefs who are fans of the flavors of house-cured country hams and such European equivalents as prosciutto — but not of the time and storage space required to make them — are experimenting with faster, more economical ways to flex their charcuterie muscles and present house-made meats to guests.

The resulting “quick hams” are made with smaller cuts of pork that are usually brined and smoked, so operators don’t need the cold-storage space or cash flow to hang whole hog legs for a year or more. It also means the meat, such as Louisiana-style tasso hams, Spanish lomo or city hams popular throughout the American South, can be on the menu in just days or weeks.

“Quick hams really come in handy for things I can push out and show to guests really quick,” said Anthony Gray, chef of Southern Art & Bourbon Bar in Atlanta.

“Tasso is really a nice way to show off-cuts, if you will,” he added.

Tasso is traditionally made with the pork “butt,” the technical term for the hog shoulder. But Gray makes it from any leg or shoulder pieces “that don’t look great or are kind of tough,” he said, noting that tasso typically is used as a seasoning rather than a center-of-the-plate item.

He brines an 8-ounce chunk of pork in salt, pink salt, sugar and aromatics for 24 hours. Then he rubs it with a spice mixture of paprika, cayenne, chiles, garlic and onion and lets it sit in the walk-in for another 24 hours. He then hot smokes it over hickory and applewood to an internal temperature of 155 degrees Fahrenheit.

The spice rub forms a crust on the meat that absorbs the smoke and gives the meat a richer flavor, he said.



Jason Alley, chef-owner of restaurants Comfort and Pasture, flavors his city ham, above, with a brine of apple juice, brown sugar, salt, cinnamon, anise, allspice berries, peppercorns and coriander seed. Craig Deihl of Cypress makes hams, below, from whole heritage-breed hogs using vacuum-packing equipment.

“It’s great by itself, sliced real nice and thin, but we also use it for soups and sautés,” Gray said. “It’s used both as a seasoning and as a showcase ham for us.”

He applies a similar preparation to his moulard duck breast, he said.

Gray also makes lomo, a Spanish-style cured loin prepared similarly to prosciutto, except it’s ready to eat in one month rather than 18 months.

He rubs equal amounts of raw sugar and sea salt on pork loin and lets it sit for eight days “so it really penetrates all the way through,” he said. Then he rinses it, air dries it and hangs it in his cure room for three to four weeks.

John Critchley, the chef at Ur-

bana in Washington, D.C., uses an inch-thick cut of pork shoulder for his tasso.

He cures it in salt overnight and then rubs it with olive oil and a mix of dried habañero and guajillo peppers, fresh oregano, dried thyme, and dried basil, and then he hot smokes it. He slices it thinly for charcuterie plates and also uses it on his market pizzas, which are created daily based on what’s available from the local farmers market.

“It’s not as fatty as pancetta, but you can crisp it up and also add it to stews and pastas in the same style,” he said.

Adam Close, chef at Blossom in Charleston, S.C., said an important aspect to smoking quick hams is to let them form



a pellicle, a sort of skin that allows more smoke to stick to the surface.

So after he brines ham for five days in salt, pink salt, brown sugar, thyme, rosemary and a little bourbon, he lets it dry in the cooler overnight to form that pellicle before hot smoking it to an internal temperature of 165 degrees Fahrenheit.

Close primarily uses the ham in his navy bean soup, but he also offers it in ham sandwiches as a special.

The bean soup used to be made with country ham that he bought from outside suppliers.

“It takes a lot of temperature control and space for the hung and dried hams and sausages,” he said. “We don’t have the kitchen space, or the time, really, for that.”

At Cypress, also in Charleston, chef Craig Deihl buys whole heritage-breed hogs and uses his vacuum-packing equipment to make hams from them. The top round, bottom round and eye round of each hind leg are used for one ham, and each knuckle — the hunk of meat over the knee — is made into another, smaller one.

He rubs salt, brown sugar, pink salt and crushed red pepper on the hams and puts them in a vacuum bag with about one-quarter cup of water. He seals them and cures them in his cooler at 38 degrees Fahrenheit for one day per pound of meat, rolling the meat in its bag every day to make sure it’s well coated.

Then he rinses it, ties it and puts it in his smoker at 210 degrees Fahrenheit until it reaches an internal temperature of 155-158 degrees. He lets it rest, CONTINUED ON PAGE 66

Chefs go hog wild for 'quick hams'

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 64
and then vacuum seals it again for at least a day.

"You don't want to cut the ham while it's still warm, or you're going to lose all that beautiful juice," he said.

During the holidays he uses the 6.5-ounce portions of the knuckle ham as a center-of-the-plate item, lacquered in a bourbon-maple glaze with a side of Brussels sprouts and sweet potatoes with truffle, honey, mascarpone and butter folded in.

He cuts the larger ham into 8- to 9-ounce slices, grills them and serves them on the bottom of a plate — much like pounded veal or chicken schnitzel — topped with a mustardy potato or sauerkraut slaw.

Jason Alley, chef-owner of Comfort and Pasture, two restaurants in Richmond, Va., uses apple juice in his city ham brine, along with brown sugar, salt, pink salt, ground cinnamon, cinnamon sticks, anise seed, allspice berries, peppercorns and coriander seed. He cooks it to let those flavors blend and then cools the liquid completely. He submerges a boned, rolled and tied ham in the strained liquid, weighing the meat down to keep it submerged and turning it once a day.

He also brines loins for

a pork pastrami. He brines them in a cooked and cooled liquid of salt, pink salt and pickling spice for 36 hours, pats them dry and then rubs them in a finely ground mixture of granulated garlic, peppercorns and coriander seed.

Then he smokes it over a mix of hickory and cherry wood to an internal temperature of 138 degrees to 140 degrees Fahrenheit.

"It's a beautiful, rosy pink pastrami, he said," noting that the meat continues to cook to about medium or medium well. "If you cook it too much, it gets a grainy, almost crumbly kind of texture," he said.

Justin Burdett, executive chef of Ruka's Table in Highlands, N.C., makes a rub the texture of wet sand to cure either ham or the picnic, a cut from the shoulder.

The rub is made of a combination of rum, molasses, salt, curing salt, peppercorns, thyme, garlic and sorghum. He cures it for two days per pound, reapplying the rub each day.

"You can pretty much cure that in two weeks' time, and then smoke it in a day," he said, noting that although two weeks is not exactly a short prep time, "it's not a year." ■

bret.thorn@penton.com



Chef John Critchley at Urbana hot smokes his tasso after rubbing it with olive oil, habañero and guajillo peppers, oregano, thyme and basil.