

# Hog Heaven

Chefs love nothing more than dressing up a pig

BY LIZ JOHNSON

It starts when you love bacon. At least that's what chef David Chang told me about his pork obsession. And he should know. He loves pork so much that people have threatened to sue him because he doesn't offer vegetarian dishes on the menus at his two restaurants in Manhattan, Momofuku Noodle Bar and Momofuku Saam Bar.

He doesn't care. In fact, he revels in it. On his Saam Bar dinner menu he has four kinds of country hams, two dishes with bacon, a third with pork jowl and one starring pork spare ribs. Oh, and did I mention the steamed pork buns, the lemongrass pork sausage or the pig's-head torchon?

"We like pork because it's the one meat that pisses everyone off," he says.

That's certainly one way of looking at it.

Another way is to say that we like pork because it tastes better than ever. That's

certainly why I'm obsessed. Surely

you remember the shoe-leather pork chops of your youth? The

vacuum-sealed packages of slimy ham Mom opened to

make your brown-bag sandwich?

Forget all that. Just taste the Ben-

ton's Smoky Mountain Country Ham—one of those four artisanal hams on Chang's menu. You'll understand.

"It's sort of a slap to the face if you've grown up on the generic stuff," says Chang. "It tastes like eating bacon in a hickory smokehouse. It's almost abrasive in a good way."

2007 was the Chinese Year of the Pig—in chefs' kitchens, too

Those sorts of powerful flavors have catapulted pork to the forefront of menus. No question—2007 really was the year of the pig, and Chang isn't the only chef to think so.

As 2008 takes off, everywhere you turn you'll find a menu with a charcuterie platter on it. Many chefs, like Chang, are sourcing hams and sausages from artisanal producers. Others have learned to cure the meats—or craft the sausages or terrines or pâtés—themselves.

What was that about obsession?

## A Tasty Cure

Cup your hands around your eyes and put your face up to the window of the dining room at Arrows Restaurant in Ogunquit, Maine. You'll have to be careful not to set off the alarm, because the restaurant, which relies on the seasonal produce it grows on the property, is closed for the season. But until it reopens in April, you'll see something pretty unusual in the dining room: whole legs of prosciutto hanging from the ceiling.

"We've been curing meats for about 18 years," says Clark Frasier, the co-chef and co-owner with Mark Gaier. "It's not a new trend here."

Nor anywhere. Curing meat preserves it, which is what people needed to do in order to survive before refrigeration.

"It's an ingenious way of preservation," says Matthew Karp, the chef-owner of Plates, a cozy little restaurant across the street from the train station in Larchmont, N.Y. "The Italians are such artisans



Curing meat preserves it, a practice that goes back centuries

## What's on Your Plate?

A typical charcuterie platter can include anything from dry-cured hams—called different names depending on where they're from—to sausage to terrines. Here's a look at a few of the meats you might expect to have.

### Ham

**Prosciutto di Parma.** Italian ham from Parma (which is also known for Parmesan cheese). It's aged between 14 months and two years.

**Speck.** Italian ham from Alto Adige. It's brined with juniper berries and then cold-smoked.

**Jamon Serrano.** Dry-cured ham from Spain.

**Virginia ham.** Most Americans are familiar with Smithfield. These hams are dry-cured and smoked.

**Other artisanal hams.** Thanks to restaurants on the East Coast, Benton's Smoky Mountain Country Hams from Tennessee are enjoying popularity. They have a very smoky taste—almost like you're standing next to the barbecue when you eat them.

### Sausage

There are fresh, cooked, smoked and dry-cured sausages.

**Coppa.** Italian. Sometimes called capicollo, it's flavored with red wine and garlic and shaped into a circle.

**Saucisson a l'Ail.** French. Flavored with garlic and red wine.

**Chorizo.** Mexican. Made with paprika and herbs.



Hams have different names, depending on where they're from

### Cured meats

**Pancetta.** Made from the same cut of pork as bacon—the belly—but rolled instead. It is not smoked, either.

**Guiancale.** The jowl of the pig, which is cured like pancetta.

**Mortadella.** The original bologna, studded with green pistachios.

### Other meats

**Rillettes.** Usually made from duck or pork, the meat is cooked slowly until it shreds, then is combined with fat to form a spreadable paste.

**Pâté.** Made by finely grinding or chopping meats and mixing them with spices and fat until it's either spreadable or sliceable. Popular ones are made from chicken liver or pork, but there are many varieties, including salmon.

**Terrines.** A terrine is a pâté served in a mold.



**Top:** Chef Carmen Gonzalez serves her native Puerto Rican, home-style cooking in her new restaurant, *Lucy of Gramercy*, in Manhattan.

**Bottom:** Barbara Lynch, the chef-owner of Boston's *The Butcher Shop*, says the eatery/wine bar serves as a "tribute to European boucheries."

that they found a way to preserve things and make them culinary delights at the same time."

And so he decided to give it a try. Karp started by curing prosciutto in his basement at home.

"I didn't tell anyone what it was, and my wife and my housekeeper saw it," he says, laughing. "They nearly jumped through the ceiling—they were like, 'What's this thing hanging here?'"

Now he has several "things" hanging in his walk-in cooler in the basement: soppressata, salami, chorizo and another couple of legs of prosciutto.

"It certainly gives the walk-in a lot of character," he says. "I have some squeamish bartenders."

But people become less squeamish as they become more aware of culinary arts and wisdom, whether that's appreciating what goes into curing meat or understanding the advantages of hormone-free meat and local produce. In both cases, bringing back the old ways of doing things usually makes for better-tasting food.

"It's certainly a lost art," says Barbara Lynch, the chef-owner of *The Butcher Shop* in Boston, which serves cured meats, pâtés and terrines all day long at the bar and communal table.

### **A Time-Honored Craft**

Marc Buzzio, one of the owners of *Salumeria Biellese*, definitely does things the old-fashioned way. He makes sausages and cures meats the same way his father did when he opened the business in 1925.

"The way I dry a salami is the way they were dried for centuries," says Buzzio, who supplies charcuterie to "the who's who of the best chefs in the country," from Daniel Boulud to Gray Kunz to Thomas Keller. "The way nobody wants to do it anymore."

Buzzio also uses specific breeds of hogs for specific cuts, like Tamworths or Gloucestershire Old Spots for pancetta.

"Both are old English orchard pigs known for their fat bellies," he says. "It's what they were bred for, for centuries."

One of the people responsible for the renewed interest in the old ways is author Michael Ruhlman. His book *Charcuterie: The Craft of Salting, Smoking and Curing* (W. W. Norton), which he wrote with Brian Polcyn, a chef-instructor and expert in charcuterie, came out in 2005 and has been on the shelves of many chefs'

cramped kitchen offices ever since.

Dennis Heslin, the head chef at *London Grill* in Philadelphia, guesses he's made at least half the recipes from *Charcuterie*, including prosciutto and Tuscan salami. (And though these dishes aren't made of pork, he's also particularly proud of his tuna bresaola, which he rubs with thyme and rosemary, and lemongrass-cured duck breast.)

"I even got one of my purveyors—one of those people who pretty much only eats chicken—to try the wild boar prosciutto," he says.

Sometimes all it takes is a bit of home cooking to get people interested in cured meats and sausages. Chef Carmen Gonzalez, who with restaurateur Phil Suarez opened *Lucy of Gramercy* in Manhattan in November, serves Puerto Rican home-style cooking at her restaurant. One of her staples? Longaniza sausage, which is cured and flavored with paprika, anise seed and vinegar. It flavors her arroz con longaniza and a hearty stew made with chicken and beans, called *San Cocho*.

"I compare it to what the Italians do," she says. "They start with sausage. They'll add it to anything."

One of America's best-known chefs, Mario Batali, takes it one step further. He'll add any sort of pork—especially pork fat—to anything. A salad of pancetta, romaine and a Cherokee purple tomato I had at his *Del Posto* restaurant in Manhattan over the summer was just this side of the best BLT sandwich I'd ever had—and only because it wasn't a sandwich. When the waiter sets down your bread service at *Del Posto*, he points out two small ramekins alongside. One is butter. The other? Lardo—pure pork fat. Spread with abandon.

Batali also serves a lardo pizza at *Otto*, his casual pizzeria in Manhattan. A while back, I was there with a group of picky eaters who shied away from ordering it. I don't have much patience for picky eaters, and somehow it ended up on the table anyway. Guess what? The "white pizza" was declared the most delicious of the bunch. (No, I didn't tell them.)

And that brings me back to bacon. We can talk about the craft of curing, the art of sausage making or the skill of smoking, but in the end there's one reason we—and chefs—love pork in all its forms, and David Chang says it best: "It's just damn delicious." 🍷