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THE AMERICAN ISSUE: ARTISANS

Prosciutto by way of Iowa

La Quercia starts with Kurobuta pork and produces outstanding cured ham. Fabulous? Yes -- but the future holds even more.

By Amy Scattergood, Times Staff Writer July 4, 2007



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- Getting your hands on La Quercia Rossa in Southern California

Norwalk, Iowa — THE thin, translucent slices of ham have a rich, mahogany color, a satiny texture and a complex, sweet earthiness that doesn't so much hit your palate as envelope it. The flavor is rich yet surprisingly subtle, with a low-register gaminess that wants for nothing more than a nob of bread and a pour of wine to accompany it.

Which is mostly the way La Quercia Rossa prosciutto is served, on charcuterie plates at the few Los Angeles restaurants where you can find it: On Mozzarella Monday at Jar in Los Angeles, at Ford's Filling Station in Culver City and at the recently opened All' Angelo on Melrose. Mirko Paderno, All' Angelo's Italian-born chef, serves La Quercia Rossa simply, on a wooden board with grilled bread, a few sun-dried tomatoes and marinated baby artichokes. "This is the closest thing to true culatello I can get," Paderno says, referring to a prized Italian ham similar to prosciutto, a select cut that's soaked in wine before it's cured and has a sweet, almost languid taste.

But La Quercia Rossa isn't a new import from Parma, nor is it one of the celebrated jamón ibéricos recently cleared for import from Spain. It's an American ham made from Berkshire (also known as Kurobuta) pork.

For the last year, Herb and Kathy Eckhouse and their tiny team — none of whom is Italian — have been making this handcrafted prosciutto in Norwalk, Iowa, in the middle of a windblown and distinctly American landscape of corn and soybeans.

That the Eckhouses have succeeded in making what is arguably the best prosciutto this side of Parma in a nondescript building in the American Midwest is a remarkable achievement. Prosciutto di Parma, the famed dry-aged Italian ham, has a mystique born of tradition and provenance and mysterious chemistry. Historically, it was made in the foothills of the Apennines from roaming pigs that fed on fallen acorns. Cured in sea salt, the hams hung in local basements, the complex flavors encouraged by the circulating Italian winds, for the long altering months — a year, a year and a half, even more. Making prosciutto was — and is — considered an epic art form.

Yet La Quercia Rossa is made continents away from any Italian farmhouse, from an heirloom British-origin breed of American-raised pigs usually known by their Japanese name — and it's ready for market in a year's time or less. It's not the only cured meat La Quercia produces. It also makes outstanding pancetta, a lovely speck (smoked ham) redolent of apple wood, guanciale (cured pork jowls) and an American prosciutto made from mixed breed pigs. When sources are available, many of these products are made from organic pork.

There's been a recent groundswell of expert handcrafting of Italian-style cured meats, or salumi, here in the U.S. Paul Bertolli's Berkeley-based Fra' Mani and Armandino Batali's Salumi, in Seattle, both turn out phenomenal domestic charcuterie.

Like Batali, a former Boeing exec, and Bertolli, previously longtime chef at Berkeley's Chez Panisse, the Eckhouses came to prosciutto in midlife. After almost 20 years as a seed company executive in Des Moines, three and a half of which were spent (with his wife, Kathy and their children) in Parma, Italy, as president of the company's Italian subsidiary, Herb quit corporate America in 2000. Shortly thereafter, he and Kathy, now in their late 50s, began curing ham in their suburban Des Moines basement.

Living in Parma, they'd fallen in love with the region's famed salumi. Eckhouse locates one epiphanic moment to a dinner he had with a friend at a restaurant that served particularly sublime prosciutto. After a meal that included two plates of it — and two flasks of Lambrusco — Herb starting thinking about all those pigs back in Iowa in a radically different light. And he wanted to turn them into prosciutto.

The fact that he'd never made ham before, or that he wasn't Italian (Herb, who was born in Iowa and grew up in Chicago, describes himself as a "Harvard-educated Jewish liberal," while Kathy grew up in Berkeley) didn't faze him. The American tradition of reinvention, says Herb, smiling at the many implicit ironies, "can be liberating." So he befriended a few of Parma's artisan prosciutto makers.



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Italy revisited

SETTLED back in the U.S., in their Des Moines basement, the Eckhouses experimented with techniques learned from those artisans. While the hams aged — watched over by the couple's three then-preteen and teenage children and their fascinated cat — Kathy read literature on *salumi*-making, and Herb periodically returned to Europe to continue his research. He revisited Parma and traveled to Langhirano, the town in the province of Parma known for its prosciutto.

Back in Norwalk, a dozen miles down the road from their house, they built a small factory. They built it from the prairie up, to their own specifications and to fit the machinery that they imported — lock, stock and meat massager — from Italy. "We tried to figure out something between our refrigerator and this building," says Herb, an angular man with a thicket of graying hair. "We couldn't." The machinery read-outs remain set to Italian even though Herb admits he could reprogram them into English.

"If you're an Italian in Italy," Herb says, "there's a lot that comes with the pork that you don't have here." In other words, without tradition to uphold, the Eckhouses are free to make prosciutto the way they want to.

"In Italy there's a saying, '*Quello che c'e*,' a pig eats what there is," he says. In Iowa, that would be corn and soybeans, not the absolute ideal feed for raising flavorful pork, but not bad either.

Every Friday, Herb and his small crew unload the fresh pork they get from a network of local farmers and pork producers such as Beeler, Eden Natural and Niman Ranch. When they were just starting out, the Eckhouses assumed that sourcing the pork would be the easy part, but the Eckhouses say the most challenging thing about starting the *prosciuttificio* has been finding pork that meets their exacting standards. "That just seemed so counterintuitive, given how many pigs there are here," Kathy says.

After unloading the meat, the crew gathers along a long table to salt about 500 hams, the pure sea salt crystals heaped in a geologic mound, some of it falling to scatter and crunch on the floor. "It's slightly sacramental, this process," Kathy says as she packs it around the curves and fissures of each ham.

Delicate, nuanced

THE Eckhouses use less salt than is traditionally used in Parma, and no garlic, and they shear more of the skin from the ham, using what is technically a *culaccia* cut — the choice femoral cut of the ham instead of the whole leg — which results in a drier texture and a delicate, nuanced flavor. The smaller cut also lessens the curing time but still, according to Herb, ensures an intricacy of flavor.

After salting, the hams begin a cycle of curing, washing and trimming, then graduate to an aging process of eight to 12 months — longer than the seven months required by the FDA, but shorter than the curing time for much traditional Italian prosciutto, some of which ages for 18 months or even longer.

During the curing time, the hams are painted with *sugna*, a mixture of lard, corn flour, salt and spices. (In Italy, wheat and/or rice is used, rather than corn flour.) The rooms of the plant were designed to replicate climate conditions prevalent in Italy during curing time, from late fall, when the pigs were traditionally slaughtered, through the cold winter and then the rising temperatures of spring and summer. At the end of the aging process, when the conditions outside are just right, vents are opened to let in the prairie winds.

An unalloyed gaminess comes through in La Quercia prosciutto, which is exactly what the Eckhouses want. "It's expressing terroir," Kathy says, motioning to the windblown landscape. "This is what we have."

At the end of the long months of curing, the hams are cut down and trimmed, then wrapped and shipped to some of the best restaurants in America.









In Los Angeles, depending on the vicissitudes of the chefs, you might find La Quercia speck at Mozza or at Costa Mesa's Marché Moderne, *guanciale* at Cut, or prosciutto americano on the charcuterie plate at A.O.C. On an afternoon last week, Kathy was overnight-shipping orders to two frantic customers — a batch of La Quercia Rossa to New York's Le Cirque restaurant and a parcel of *culaccia bianca* (cured fat sheared from prosciutto) to Postrio in Las Vegas. For the rest of the day, Herb chuckled as he muttered "emergency *lardo*!" over and over, amused by the whims of the nation's *salumi*-infatuated chefs.

"When we started out," he says, "the goal was to have a ham that could stand up to the great hams of Europe; we've done that."

So now the Eckhouses are ready to take their ham to the next level. They want to take those Berkshire pigs and feed them acorns at the end of their life, just as the pork for *prosciutto di Parma* was once accomplished, and the Spanish *jamón ibérico* is still.

To that end, last month, the Eckhouses and organic farmer Jude Becker, from whom La Quercia currently sources all its organic pork, began a new project. Becker is now raising 50 purebred Berkshire and Berkshire-cross pigs specifically for La Quercia, pigs that he'll "finish" with organic acorns.

How perfect that outside the company's decidedly utilitarian building, a sapling oak tree planted by the Eckhouses sways in the prairie wind. La Quercia, "the oak" in Italian, is both a symbol of the province of Parma and the Iowa state tree.

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Could it be that the Iowa terroir is as good as that of Parma for prosciutto? When the weather seems right, Herb opens the windows in the aging room to the air blowing in off the fields of thistle and clover. "I don't know that the air is unimportant," he says, "maybe it's really important. Maybe it's more important to me than it is to the ham."

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Get your hands on the good stuff

La Quercia products, including La Quercia Rossa, are available from <http://www.laquercia.us> ; Froma on Melrose, 7960 Melrose Ave., Los Angeles, (323) 653-3700; and Lucca Cafe & Market, 6507 Quail Hill Parkway, Irvine, (949) 725-1773, <http://www.luccacafe.com> . Whole Foods stores carry some La Quercia products.

— Amy Scattergood

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