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Italian-inspired hog heaven...in Iowa

By Nicholas Day
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DES MOINES—Paul Kahan, chef-owner of Blackbird and Avec restaurants in Chicago, remembers the day he discovered what many critics and chefs are calling the best prosciutto made in America. A few years ago, at an outdoor event in Des Moines, he was introduced to a man who was building a prosciutto plant.

"He looked like he'd just finished jogging," Kahan recalled, "and he said, 'I've got some samples for you to taste.'"

Kahan, a well-known booster of Midwest agriculture in general and pork in particular, and the aspiring prosciutto-maker, Herb Eckhouse, walked over to a parking garage. Kahan was one of the first to taste what he calls "the best prosciutto you can get in America, hands down" out of the back of Eckhouse's car. It was, Kahan said, "really delicate and dry and delicious."

La Quercia (la KWAIR-cha), the company Eckhouse and his wife, Kathy, founded just south of Des Moines, opened in early 2005. A slice of their prosciutto—gentle and creamy with a deep, earthy resonance—gives the lie to those who had told them no one in the United States could make an honest prosciutto.

"There's a lot of talk about how you can't make a real prosciutto outside of Italy—how you need the wind coming over the Apennines," said Kathy Eckhouse. "The mystique is great. But I know for a fact that the air in Italy is not that great. And they all use modern equipment."

Italian ideal

Herb Eckhouse may be the first prosciutto-maker with a Harvard MBA. After a long career with Pioneer Hi-Bred, a seed company, Eckhouse became head of Pioneer's Italian operation in the mid-1990s and the family moved to Parma, Italy, where they lived for three and a half years.

"We became enamored of all things Italian," Kathy said. Especially their hometown's most famous product: prosciutto di Parma.

"The thought that crossed our minds was, 'What are we doing in Iowa with the tremendous bounty that we have here?'" Kathy recalled. The Eckhouses



L.A. Times photo by Steve Pope
Herb Eckhouse ages his prosciutto in a custom-built plant in Iowa. Instead of using a whole rear leg, his company, La Quercia, uses a select cut of the rear leg muscles called culaccia.



L.A. Times photo by Ken Hively
The American-made prosciutto is gentle and creamy with a deep, earthy resonance.



L.A. Times photo by Steve Pope
A Chester white sow and piglet enjoy the mud at a farm that supplies La Quercia.

had been looking for another way to work in agriculture and prosciutto was a value-added product that seemed perfect for Iowa, where there are more pigs than people.

After taking early retirement from Pioneer, Herb Eckhouse traveled repeatedly to Parma, where he cultivated relationships with traditional producers. While he was learning the process, he and his wife founded La Quercia in 2000 and began importing and distributing select prosciutto di Parma (which they still do).

Meanwhile, they began experimenting in their home: To simulate the curing during the cold months, which is the first stage of the process, they kept pork in a large refrigerator; to re-create summer conditions, they hung it inside their finished basement.

"My sister said it looked like 'The Silence of the Hams,'" Kathy said. When they finally tasted it, they were delighted, she said, although the wait was agonizing. "You don't get to taste anything for a really long time. It's sort of like being pregnant: You have to wait. And it's about

the same amount of time."

Building for the future

In February, 2005, they opened their immaculate plant, custom-built for prosciutto-making. When the fresh meat arrives on Mondays and Fridays, it is carefully massaged with sea salt, something Kathy Eckhouse calls "a sacramental process"—after all, salt is what makes possible the alchemy of cured meat.

"The salting in a lot of ways is the most important point," Kathy said. "You put on too little salt and it'll spoil; too much salt and it'll be a salt bomb."

The meat is then transferred to cold rooms with special jets and fans to keep the air constantly circulating, and then warm rooms in which part of the hams are coated with a *sugna*, a mixture of pork fat, pepper and flour (the Eckhouses use corn flour for an Iowa touch) that protects them and slows moisture loss. Occasionally, vents in the ceiling are opened to let in the air of the surrounding prairie. After the hams have aged for a minimum of eight months, they're a beautiful pal-

ate of deep red, pink and caramel.

Instead of a whole rear leg, La Quercia uses a select cut of the rear leg muscles (what in Italy makes up the prized cured meat *culatello*) called *culaccia*, "which in Italy would be called 'big butt'" Kathy said, laughing. "That's not the most attractive term: 'Try our 'big butt' prosciutto!'"

The cut, which has neither the shank nor the knuckle, has a final weight of 6 to 8 pounds, far smaller than a standard prosciutto and easier to handle. And unlike most prosciutto, it isn't pressed into shape, which leaves it with an open and languorous texture.

They also make speck (smoked prosciutto), pancetta (spiced, unsmoked bacon) and guanciale (the dry-cured jowl that's traditionally used for spaghetti carbonara).

At Panozzo's Italian Market in the South Loop, which carries almost the whole line of La Quercia products, chef and manager John Asbaty said that the prosciutto has more marbling than Italian prosciutto.

"The texture tends to be even more buttery, which is impressive," he said. "Not to knock prosciutto di Parma, but we're getting people who come in and specifically request La Quercia."

(Panozzo's, 1303 S. Michigan Ave., 312-356-9966, carries almost all of La Quercia's products, including the heirloom La Quercia rossa for \$23 per pound and the prosciutto Americano for \$22 per pound. Some products also are sold on the Eckhouses' Web site, laquercia.us.)

Early on, Kathy said, it was easy to be beset by doubts, Kathy said. In late 2005, when their first round of prosciutto was finished, "we had all these hundreds of hams and all this money that we've invested, and we thought, 'What if it isn't any good?'"

"Herb and I took a walk around the plant and Herb was saying to the hams, 'Be delicious, be delicious.'"

The hams listened.

Something to chew on



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