

## Herb Eckhouse of La Quercia Meats: Quality at Every Step

Ed Levine , Serious Eats



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The idea for [La Quercia Meats](#) ("oak" in Italian), the Iowa-based company that produces what Vogue magazine food columnist Jeffrey Steingarten has declared "the best prosciutto in the world, foreign or domestic," came to Herb Eckhouse during a meal in Venice. "The meal started with prosciutto di Parma, and we were supposed to move on to pasta, but we were so struck by the simplicity and quality of the cured meat that we kept on ordering more of it," Herb recalls. "My friend leaned over to me and said, 'You know, if you can make something this good, then you're going to make a lot of people happy.'"

At the time, in 2000, Eckhouse was a 50-year-old executive from Des Moines who was working at seed company Pioneer Hi-Bred, where he was in charge of the company's Italian branch. He lived in Parma with his wife and two daughters. "In Italy, entire days are planned around where you want to end up for lunch. Italians wake up every day expecting to eat something delicious. Americans rarely have that experience." To Eckhouse, that didn't make much sense.

"The Midwest central prairie is one of the most fertile places on the globe, and what are we doing with it?" he said. "It's commodity everything. We don't make anything that shows we appreciate that we've been given this bounty." The seed of an idea to produce an American version of prosciutto in his home state had planted itself. "It was an idea born out of naiveté and ignorance, really," he says. "I had no limitations from experience, tradition, or knowledge, so I had no reason to think that it couldn't be done. I knew the idea was crazy, but I didn't know if it was crazy and also stupid."

Requiring up to a year for the meat to age, prosciutto production is not a business for the impatient. "It's literally money hanging from hooks," Eckhouse says. He spent the last five months of 2000 coming up with a business plan to better understand the market. "There were a lot of green lights, a lot of positive signals." U.S. sales of imported prosciutto were growing

rapidly, and the American artisanal food movement—most notably homegrown wine, cheeses, and small-farm meat—was taking off. "One of the categories that seemed like it hadn't gone through that evolution was salumi [Italian cured meats]," Eckhouse says. "I wanted to address that."

Despite the green lights, Eckhouse played it cautiously: "I didn't really know if people would buy prosciutto from a Jewish guy named Herb," he says in his easy manner. For the next four years, he carefully studied the art of curing hams, moving the family car out of the garage to hang pork legs and converting the guest bedroom into an aging room. "You really get to know each piece of meat personally. I'd visit each one several times a day. They were like pets to me."

From talking to retailers and buyers of prosciutto, Eckhouse gleaned that despite its popularity, Italian hams had problems. Due to strict government-controlled Denominazione di Origine Protetta (DOP) standards—many of which are based on tradition rather than sound reasoning—Italy decrees that all prosciutto di Parma must be prepared in the same manner. "It just didn't make sense to me. There are things that they do just for aesthetics—maintaining the visual look of the denomination. It didn't favor the eating experience or the practicality of producing it."

In typical American fashion, Herb decided to "change the way that prosciutto is made. We wanted something that was American in nature, and to reflect our own ideas of what is practical, and our customers' ideas of what is good to eat."

After mangling a few legs ("nobody is a born butcher," he says), Eckhouse devised a series of improvements, mainly involving opening up the leg more during the butchering stage, removing the shank bone, and aggressive trimming of skin and fat. "We end up with much higher yield, less water, more uniformity, and less salt. It's sweeter and richer in flavor, which is just what we'd hoped for."

From the offset, Eckhouse decided against using the confinement-reared animals that make up the bulk of Iowa's livestock output. Despite the fact that Iowa is home to more pigs than people, Eckhouse estimates that less than 1 percent of the animals meet the quality and humane standards required to become a La Quercia ham. "With an aged product like prosciutto, wine, or cheese, the inherent quality of the basic ingredients really expresses itself down the line." These days, Eckhouse has pigs for his Acorn Edition hams specially finished on a 50 percent acorn diet, which, he says, improves the quality of the fat and the flavor of the meat.

Since it first introduced its prosciutto to the public, La Quercia has become the darling producer of chefs on both coasts, expanding its operations to nearly 40,000 hams a year and adding a variety of other Italian cured meats, such as guanciale and coppa. But, "in the end, it all comes down to quality and consistency," says Eckhouse of La Quercia's success. "Getting it out there in front of people to try is important, but I always tell our employees that our brand is only ever as good as the last bite. You make one bad ham, that's 100 customers who won't be buying from us again."

"In the U.S., we're OK with reinventing ourselves," Eckhouse says. "That's an American value that should be part of our food culture as well. We're trying to convince people that we have and American food culture one ounce at a time."