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## The Year's Best New Bacon, Straight From the 'Bacon Pig'

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*It's hard to do much better than La Quercia's rich, buttery, dry-cured bacon from the hard-to-find Tamworth breed of hog*



The best new bacon in our deli case in the last year is coming in from Herb Eckhouse and La Quercia in Iowa, whose other cured pork you might be familiar with. We've had his pancetta and guanciale for many years now and both are featured at length in [Zingerman's Guide to Better Bacon](#).

This one's been in the works for a number of years now. While [the bacon](#) is dry-cured (no pumping with liquid like you'd get with a lot of commercial stuff), Herb himself is actually darned pumped up about it. "This bacon was really an act of faith," Herb told me. "Four years ago we made a few legs of Tamworth prosciutto to see what it would be like. It was totally delicious. In fact our buddy Bruce Aidells (chef, and

author of a range of good pork books) said the Tamworth meat was as good or better than any he had had anywhere—Spain, Italy, you name it. This one was better!

"Unfortunately," Herb continued, "when we went back to get more meat, we couldn't find any. The breed is classified as 'threatened' and there aren't that many of them to be found—just a few here and there. Russ Kremer, who is one of our favorite—probably now our favorite—pig farmers, because he really does offer his pigs a place to roam outside on the hillside once they are out of the nursery, is also is a Tamworth enthusiast. He has Tamworth lines that he has kept free of the modern pig breeding that has made pork too lean and caused the animals to become prone to stress. After four years of asking, begging, pleading, cajoling, guilt-tripping, and visiting ... we finally got a Tamworth program going with him. Our first delivery was October 2010. Now we buy all of the legs and bellies he's got!"

Having done a fair bit of research over the years while writing *Zingerman's Guide to Better Bacon*, I can tell you that a lot of the old sources list the Tamworths as hogs that were bred specifically to have their pork cured up into bacon. Herb told me pretty much what other sources have said as well—the belly meat from the Tamworth is supposed to be particularly tender. It's also known for having a near-perfect balance of fat and lean, and its flavor gets particularly sweet during the maturing.

The key for me is that the fat is super rich, almost buttery in texture. Given that Herb has even more practice preparing it than I do, I asked him for his input. "I like it very lightly cooked at low heat," he said. "Perhaps even better still is that you can eat it raw, just as you would pancetta or prosciutto. Since we make and preserve it the way we do all our meats—drying it to remove the moisture—it is shelf stable. You can enjoy 'bacon sashimi' if you want. When you eat it without cooking it," Herb said, "you can really taste the sweetness of the meat. But in a way, I guess, the light cooking is kind of the best of both worlds—the succulent melted fat with the sweet meat flavor. Because it is dry-cured and has low water content, the fat has a lower smoke point, so however you cook it, we recommend doing so at low heat. We use no sugar, dextrose, molasses, or any sweetening of any kind, yet that bacon is sweet. Probably as important as anything is the soft, smoky, very clean, no burn aftertaste—it just lingers."

Herb's right—sliced and eaten as is, the Tamworth is terrific on an antipasto plate. Just slice it and serve it as is with a warm loaf of Italian country bread, some olives, fresh vegetables, a couple of good cheeses, and a nice glass of wine. That's a very nice way to spend an evening's worth of summer eating. It's great too if you dice it, give it a light fry up, and then toss it with pasta. Put the pasta right into the hot fat with the bacon, pour into warm bowls, and then grate on a bit of Parmigiano Reggiano cheese and plenty of black pepper. But you can of course do pretty much anything you like with it.

*Image: Courtesy of La Quercia*

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