



Cured Pork from La Quercia in Iowa: A Breed Apart

Talk to Herb Eckhouse, the founder of Iowa's extraordinary ham curing house La Quercia, and you'd be forgiven for confusing him for a winemaker, since he uses a similar vocabulary. He describes pig breeds as "varietals." He refers to his standard cured ham as the "house blend."

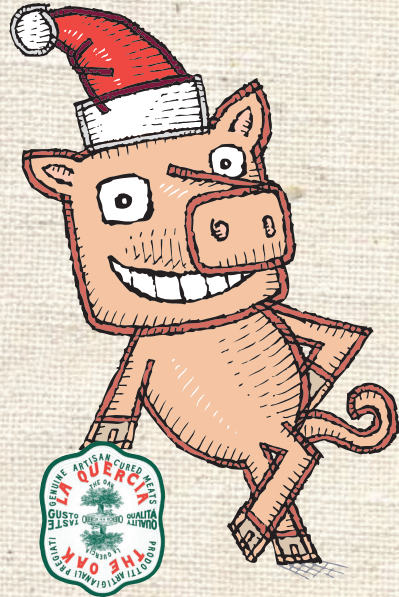
And he describes ham aroma and flavors like he's got his nose perched over a prize vintage, with words like "beguiling," "fruity" and "perfumed."

This may come off as frippery—until you taste the ham. Trust me, he's not being over the top. This is ham that deserves a rotund vocabulary. The similarities with wine are not just for show. They illustrate something that La Quercia is doing that almost no one else is in America or Italy: focusing on the breed. Herb feels breed of the hog is the main contributor to prosciutto flavor in the same way the variety of grape contributes to wine flavor.



Ed Behr writes in the *Art of Eating*, "An aged dry-cured ham reveals the quality of the fresh pork in the same way that a mature cheese reveals the quality of the original milk." While nearly all Italian prosciutto makers and American ham curers use standard breed white pigs, La Quercia focuses on heirloom breed Berkshire and Berkshire cross hogs. Berkshire hogs have been bred for flavor and they are renowned for their distinctive "porkiness." Standard breed white pigs haven't exactly been bred for lack of flavor, but their flavor-enhancing characteristics have been downplayed to market pork as "the other white meat" and to encourage fast growth and consistent, large litters.

Berkshire hogs were rediscovered by chefs in America over ten years ago. Until then most were sent to Japan. (Sometimes it seems like you can build a successful food business by simply researching what we export to Japan and sell it back to Americans.) Today, Herb works with Paul Willis, Jude Becker and other Iowa farmers who raise heirloom pigs humanely, with outdoor access, common social area, and no sub-therapeutic hormones.



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Zingerman's is a family of small food-related companies in Ann Arbor, Michigan. We offer a treasure trove of traditionally made foods. Full-flavored foods that have been part of people's eating for a long time. Newer foods that are made with traditional, artisan methods. Most of all, we love to share great food with everyone—we think you can really taste the difference.

We love to nurture deep, sustainable relationships with food makers like Herb & Kathy Eckhouse at their small company, La Quercia, in Norwalk, Iowa. You may not have La Quercia cured ham in your order today. But the story behind it rings true for many of the foods we offer, including those in your box.

Enjoy, Mo



Herb joins a select few folks at the forefront of an American renaissance in traditional pork curing. He is producing ham at a level that rivals anything we can get from abroad. This is an amazing development for the American artisanal food world but not unprecedented. To get back to my wine analogy: In 1976, Californian wines went to Paris and famously won a blind tasting against some of France's most prestigious vintners. There hasn't been a comparable international ham tasting. But if there is and La Quercia is among Italian prosciuttos and Spanish jamons, I wouldn't bet against Iowa.