

Zingerman's
Guide to Better

STORIES OF
PORK BELLIES,
HUSH PUPPIES,
ROCK 'N' ROLL MUSIC
AND BACON FAT
MAYONNAISE

Bacon

INCLUDES 42 RECIPES

ARI WEINZWEIG

and cook the whole concoction for at least two hours in the oven or atop the stove. It's a simple dish, so the quality of the ingredients makes a big difference. James Joyce was apparently a big fan. Most Dubliners have some story of it, and most will probably tell you it's best with a pint of Guinness (although that's probably true for any dish you ask them about). Because it can be cooked ahead, coddle is quite popular for funerals (seriously) and is often served at the wake. It's also popular as a Sunday night dinner—the sort of comfort food you want before going back to work on Monday morning.

Peter Foyne shared the following story. "My late mother was from Dublin . . . It was the tradition in Dublin to have a fried breakfast on Sunday morning . . . The bacon, which was streaky, was not bought ready-sliced, but whole and then cut as needed. The coddle was a *mixem gatherem* stew made on Saturday night from the scrap bacon, sausage and any other bits and pieces, and was consumed by the men on their return from the pub."

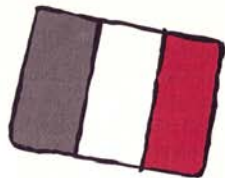
Three More "Bacon" from the Boot: Bellies, Backs and Jowls in the Italian Style

Pancetta

Pancetta is an Italian bacon: an unsmoked pork belly cured with salt and spices, then rolled and aged. Diced and fried, it adds flavor to all types of savory dishes. But what few Americans realize is that the number one way to eat pancetta in Italy is actually raw, as a staple of the antipasto plate alongside prosciutto and salami, maybe some good olives and sticks of fresh fennel. While most of the pancetta sold in America isn't made with this kind of eating in mind, it's what you'll get in any good food setting in Italy. Fortunately that's changing—high-quality pancetta is now being made here in North America.

Traveling in the southern Italian region of Calabria not long ago, I was served some pancetta Calabrese—cured pork belly spiced (as is most everything in the region) with ground red chiles. I took a couple slices off the buffet, unsure what it would be like. Even knowing that it was supposed to be eaten uncooked, I still sort of paused when presented with raw bacon. But damn, it was good. Seriously melt in your mouth, long flavor, deliciously good. The experience reinforced how much I needed to refocus my own pancetta perspective—if you do the same, there's good eating to be had.

And if you do eat it raw, take note that, as with cured hams, longer aging likely means more developed flavor. I learned this from Herb Eckhouse, whose Iowa-made La Quercia pancetta we use at Zingerman's. Like me, Herb grew up in a Jewish home in suburban Chicago. Like me, he went off to college and studied subjects that had nothing in particular to do with food—in his case political science, economics and history.



From there our stories diverged onto very different paths. While I got a job washing dishes, Herb went on to work for Pioneer Hi-Bred, the Iowa seed company founded in 1926 by the liberal visionary Henry Wallace. Wallace later became Franklin Roosevelt's Secretary of Agriculture, then his vice president and finally his Secretary of Commerce before running for president himself on the Progressive Party ticket in 1948. Although Pioneer was sold to DuPont in the late 1990s, its original business philosophy and approach to seeds and agriculture were very much aligned with the ideas espoused by many of us on the progressive end of the food world today.

In 1985 Herb was offered the chance to take over Pioneer's Italian operation, based in Parma. Arriving in town he found himself—as most people do in Parma, it being the international headquarters of cured-ham consumption—eating and appreciating great prosciutto most every day. This is when Herb underwent the mid-life

career change thing. The job switch led him all the way back to Iowa, where he started his work making great prosciutto, guanciale and pancetta. From the beginning he's been focused on using the best hogs he can find, feeding in the old ways and most recently finishing his hogs on acorns. He and his wife, Kathy, use only pork from free-running Iowa hogs and they cure without nitrites (nor do they use the vegetable extracts that most non-nitrite curers employ). In short, Herb's quest for ever-better quality, ever-finer finish and ever-greater complexity is right up our alley.

The La Quercia pancetta starts with Berkshire pork that Herb has cured with black and white peppercorns, juniper, bay leaves and sea salt. His standard cure is currently 60 days—going past that tends to make the meat a bit quicker to smoke in the pan when you cook with it, and since that's how most Americans use pancetta the caution is understandable. But for eating raw the meat grows more tender and richer in flavor with a longer cure. I like it aged up to six months when we can get it that way. Interestingly, when I was eating that pancetta Calabrese, I asked the chef how long it had been aged. "Six to eight months," he answered without hesitating. The man knew his pork, and the fact that it had been aged that long was clearly a point of pride.

Here in the States, Armandino Batali started doing similar things with pancetta about 10 years ago at his tiny shop, Salumi, in downtown Seattle. Like his more famous son Mario, Armandino is almost impossibly nice. He's a retired Boeing engineer, whose story is a combination of Allan Benton's family tradition and Herb Eckhouse's second-career turn. Armandino's maternal grandfather opened the first Italian import food shop in Seattle back in 1903. After three decades as an engineer, Armandino came "back" to the family's food-retailing roots, blending his disciplined attention to process with the craft and emotion of traditional Italian eating. Today, Salumi is run by Armandino's daughter Gina, who spent 20 years as a human resources expert for General Electric, along with her husband, Brian D'Amato.

All the meats they're producing are very good, including the

pancetta, of which they make two varieties. One is crafted using pork from a farm just south of the Washington-Oregon border, the other using Berkshire hogs from Newman Farms in Missouri (the same source Sam Edwards buys from). Gina and Brian rub the meat with pepper, salt, spices and a touch of nitrite. Gina is adamant—as are so many others—that the nitrite improves the finished flavor. They hang the bellies for three to four months in order to achieve the same sort of rich tenderness that Herb Eckhouse gets at La Quercia.

Paul Bertolli, previously chef at Chez Panisse and Oliveto in the Bay Area and a producer of very fine traditional Italian salami, has also turned to making pancetta lately. Paul and his crew at his firm, Fra Mani, start by hand-trimming the pork: "All the bellies we'd get in were already skinned, which takes too much fat off," he explained. "So we take in the bellies whole and hand-skin them here and that lets us keep the fat the way we like." The meat is then rubbed with sea salt and celery juice (a natural source of nitrite) and left to set up for three days. It's then re-rubbed with garlic, crushed bay leaf, ground clove and black pepper and aged for about eight days. Although pancetta that's to be eaten raw benefits from a long cure, a short-cured variety like Paul's can still be superb for cooking. Since almost everyone he sells his pancetta to wants to cook with it, he simply opted not to age it out as he would a salami or cured ham that would be eaten uncooked.

Whichever brand you're using, a little bit of good pancetta goes a long way. It's great in pasta carbonara, of course. But you can also use it in vegetable or bean soups, or diced and tossed with cooked clams. Try wrapping fresh figs in slices of pancetta, sticking them with a sprig of fresh rosemary and then running the skewers under the broiler to cook the pork very lightly—I've provided recipes for most of these dishes at the end of the book. John Thorne also shares an excellent recipe in *Simple Cooking* (one of my favorite food books of all time) for pasta with pancetta, celery and white beans: just fry the pancetta, then the celery and finally add the cooked beans.