

Emily Bassoni: Single, Straight (and Romance-Free) Moms by Choice **Christine Muhlke**: The World's Best Prosciutto Is From ... Iowa?

The New York Times Magazine

FEBRUARY 1, 2009



THE BIG FIX

What can Obama do
to transform an economy that can no longer count on
Wall Street or Silicon Valley?

BY DAVID LEONHARDT



Aging Gracefully

With salt and patience, an Iowa couple are transforming their state's bounty into world-class prosciutto.

Herb and
Kathy Eckhouse
of La Quercia.

If salami is the blog of cured meats, then prosciutto is the great novel. A salami requires anywhere from 20 to 120 days to cure, making it popular with chefs who want to put their house-made stamp on a rustic appetizer. But the best prosciutto requires 8 to 24 months to transform the salt-covered hind leg of a pig into a \$35-per-pound luxury, a rosy meat that, when thinly sliced, is a complex, faintly salty delicacy that dissolves into richness on the tongue. It is nothing short of a miracle.

"It's a leap of faith," Paul Bertolli, the expert behind Fra' Mani salumi, acknowledged with a laugh. Known for his artisanal cured meats, he has yet to make the leap to prosciutto.

Space, time and, as he put it, "all that money hanging up in the air" are daunting barriers.

Prosciutto has been made on the Italian peninsula since the time of Caesar. Traditionally the legs are hung after the November slaughter and left to mature throughout the seasons. Careful attention is paid not only to the breed and weight of the pig but also to the way the leg is boned and trimmed, the type and amount of salt applied and the aging, cleaning and sealing processes, all of which must be undertaken at just the right time, under favorable temperatures and humidity. It takes skill to ensure the meat doesn't rot; texture and flavor require artistry. Today in Parma, Italy, there are schools and trade groups dedi-

Photograph by David La Spina

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cated to the science of the ham. Knowledge aside, you still have to wait an awfully long time before you can taste if what you've made is any good.

Nine years ago, Herb Eckhouse, then a 50-year-old Des Moines seed-company executive who'd been based in Parma, got a glimmer of what he'd like to do with his early retirement. He was eating prosciutto in Parma with a friend who said, "You know, if you make something this good, you're going to make a lot of people happy." A ham-shaped light bulb went off, Eckhouse recalled.

For years, he imagined making good food in Iowa. "It was clear that we had this incredible bounty around us, but we weren't known for creating great stuff to eat," he told me, stretching his rangy frame at his dining room table. (Clearly things have changed: his wife, Kathy, was serving us apple pie whose heartbreaking crust was made with lard rendered from acorn-fed organic Berkshire pigs, their latest project.) "At the beginning of the 20th century, Iowa fed people. And here we are in the 21st century, and we're feeding machines. It's just a priori wrong." He continued: "People were saying, 'Iowa's dying, and there's no value added here.' At that point I was thinking, Gosh, I wonder if we can make prosciutto in Iowa."

In 2001, La Quercia ("oak" in Italian) was born. Eckhouse, a Harvard social-studies major in the '60s, spent four years studying prosciutto-making. The couple would move their Volvo wagon out of the garage to weigh and salt legs, then age them in their guest bedroom. The first official prosciutto was shipped from their state-of-the-art plant near Des Moines in September 2005. Early on, the food writer Jeffrey Steingarten declared it the best prosciutto — domestic or foreign — he had tasted.

The Eckhouses are determined to not make an Italian facsimile. They might be advised by a consultant in Parma, but they call their product prosciutto Americano. (Technically it is closest to a *prosciutto addobbo*: "It's the *culaccia* plus the *fiocco* without the *stinco*," Eckhouse clarified in his warm, intelligent manner, explaining that the smaller size requires less aging time.) Their pork is sourced and slaughtered within 200 miles of their plant, and their cutting and curing techniques have been developed through much trial and error.

"One of the things in the U.S. is we don't have the thousands of years of tradition of making prosciutto — or of making anything," Eckhouse said. "But we have a much broader perspective. I feel like for the guys in Parma, they're somewhat limited in what they can do to make the product better."

Without those restrictions, the cured meats sold by La Quercia can represent the Eckhouses' sense of Midwestern *terroir*. "We have more pigs than people in Iowa," said Kathy, who handles the company's bookkeeping and some sales, helps salt the 730 hams that arrive weekly and draws upon her food-savvy upbringing in Berkeley, Calif., and Europe in her role as chief culinary officer. Herb pointed out that corn and soybeans, the state's biggest crops, are the best feed for pigs, according to Parma scientists. La Quercia also reflects the couple's political values: they require that the pigs be humanely raised and free of subtherapeutic antibiotics. "You see that the quality of the meat comes from the quality of life of the animal and the quality of the feed," Herb said. One result is that perhaps only 2 percent of the pigs killed in Iowa are candidates for La Quercia: "We're this little fringe."

But they're gaining an influential following. The silken-textured, nutty-sweet prosciutto is named on menus from A16 in San Francisco to Blackbird in Chicago, from Otto in Manhattan to Central Michel Richard in Washington, D.C. The La Quercia range, sold in Whole Foods, has expanded to include organic and heirloom prosciuttos, as well as lardo, pancetta, speck, coppa, guanciale and an annual Acorn Edition, in which subscribers pay \$3,000 to receive all the parts of the prized acorn-fed organic Berkshire meat during the year, from fresh to cured. (Paul Bertolli raved about the Acorn Edition meat, saying, "I've never had anything that good in Italy.") The plant recently expanded, too, to allow for longer aging.

Someday, Eckhouse would love to sell prosciutto in Italy: "Not because I think we're better, but because we have ours, too." Iowa, it seems, now has something to bring to the global table.



Chestnut Polenta With Ragù alla Napoletana, Eggs, Ricotta Salata and Lardo

For the ragù:


- 1 pound boneless pork shoulder, cut into large chunks
- 8 ounces pork belly, cut into large chunks
- Kosher salt
- ½ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 red onion, peeled and halved
- 2 28-ounce cans San Marzano whole peeled tomatoes and their juices
- 8 ounces prosciutto, cut into large chunks (see notes)

For the polenta:

- 1 cup coarse-ground polenta
- Kosher salt
- ¼ cup chestnut flour (see notes)
- Freshly ground black pepper
- Handful of basil leaves
- 4 to 6 eggs
- Extra-virgin olive oil
- Chunk of ricotta salata
- 4 to 6 thin slices of lardo (optional) (see notes).

1. The day before, prepare the meats for the ragù: Sprinkle the pork shoulder and pork belly all over with salt and refrigerate overnight.
2. Make the ragù: Place the olive oil in a large, heavy pot over medium-low heat. Add the onion halves, cut-side down, and brown gently for about 20 minutes, moving them occasionally. Remove the onions.
3. Place the tomatoes and their juices in a bowl, season with a few pinches of salt and squeeze into chunks. Add the tomatoes and meats (including prosciutto) to the pot and bring to a boil, stirring frequently. Reduce heat and cook at a very low simmer for 4 hours. Remove from heat and let cool.
4. Remove the meats from the sauce and set aside for another use (added to leftover ragù, they're great over pasta). Season ragù to taste with salt.
5. Make the polenta: In a medium pot, combine the polenta, 4 cups water and 1 teaspoon salt. Bring to a boil and whisk continuously until the mixture comes together. Lower heat to a simmer and stir often with a wooden spoon until tender, about 30 minutes. Stir in the chestnut flour and cook for 3 minutes. Season with salt and pepper. Remove from heat and cover.
6. In a large sauté pan, combine 3 cups of the ragù, the basil and ½ cup water. Bring to a gentle boil over medium heat. Crack the eggs and distribute them evenly on top of the ragù. Give the pan a shake to ensure that the eggs do not stick to the bottom, cover with a lid and cook until the eggs have set, 5 to 10 minutes.
7. Divide the polenta among warm bowls. Scoop up an egg with some ragù and place on the polenta. Drizzle the eggs with olive oil, grate ricotta salata over the top and garnish with a slice of lardo, if using. Serve immediately. Serves 4 to 6. Adapted from "A16: Food + Wine," by Nate Appleman, Shelley Lindgren and Kate Leahy.

NOTES: To save money, ask your prosciutto purveyor for scraps. Chestnut flour is available at buonitalia.com. La Quercia Iowa White lardo is available at laquercia.us and at murrayscheese.com.

 **TINY KITCHEN:** a video of the magazine's Jill Santopietro preparing this week's recipe from her very, very small home kitchen. **PLUS:** a recipe for onion focaccia with lardo. nytimes.com/magazine