

# The Telegraph

## How to cure your own festive ham

Home-curing ham is easy and beats shop-bought bacon hocks down.



Curing your own ham is a tasty alternative to shop-bought meat

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Can there be anything finer with which to weigh down the festive table than a classic Christmas ham, scored, glazed with sugar, besprigged with holly, and emitting the seasonal fragrances of swine and Demerara? Only one thing, perhaps: a ham you have cured yourself.

I've been keeping pigs for about four years now, but on a strictly amateur basis. After some of my initial attempts at home-curing went wrong, I turned over the pigs to a wholesale butcher who would turn them into ham and bacon the industrial way – with an entire carcass soaked for several weeks in brine, before being injected with the saline solution to ensure the cure penetrated all the way through.

“Wet curing” is efficient – but does have downsides. The taste and, particularly, texture, can be negatively affected, and the meat retains water, which oozes out unpleasantly when you cook it.

Still, I was happy enough with my commercially cured meat. But then I tasted the “dry-cured” bacon hand-produced in small batches by my local butcher, Jim Murphy in Tullow, County Carlow, Ireland, and the scales fell from my eyes.

The difference in taste blew me away. Jim’s thickly sliced, dry-cure bacon doesn’t shrink in the pan, nor does it emit any filthy white goop. The bacon also handles very differently – unlike shop bacon, it’s not slimy and, as a result, is much easier to chop and dice. There’s no rubbery aftertaste, either.

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[The best Christmas mince pie recipe \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/foodanddrink/seasonal-food-and-drink/8965520/Christmas-mince-pies-recipe.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/foodanddrink/seasonal-food-and-drink/8965520/Christmas-mince-pies-recipe.html)

[The true spirit of Christmas: the best 10 ales for the festive season \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/topics/christmas/8961002/The-true-spirit-of-Christmas-the-best-10-ales-for-the-festive-season.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/topics/christmas/8961002/The-true-spirit-of-Christmas-the-best-10-ales-for-the-festive-season.html)

[Christmas lunch: roast potatoes \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/foodanddrink/recipes/8962103/Christmas-lunch-roast-potatoes.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/foodanddrink/recipes/8962103/Christmas-lunch-roast-potatoes.html)

[Braised red cabbage \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/foodanddrink/seasonal-food-and-drink/8965280/Christmas-lunch-braised-red-cabbage-with-Malaga-raisins-and-apple.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/foodanddrink/seasonal-food-and-drink/8965280/Christmas-lunch-braised-red-cabbage-with-Malaga-raisins-and-apple.html)

[Christmas lunch: turkey with sausage, chestnut and apple stuffing \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/foodanddrink/seasonal-food-and-drink/8961875/Christmas-lunch-turkey-with-sausage-chestnut-and-apple-stuffing.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/foodanddrink/seasonal-food-and-drink/8961875/Christmas-lunch-turkey-with-sausage-chestnut-and-apple-stuffing.html)

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But with whole, dry-cured hams pretty much impossible to obtain commercially in Britain, the only way you are going to get one for Christmas is if you make it yourself. As I discovered when Jim agreed to show me the basics of the art of dry-curing, with the right ingredients it’s actually very easy to do.

The basic ingredient for curing meat is salt. Indeed, cuts of pork were traditionally packed in boxes of salt and placed under heavy weights for weeks. Unfortunately, however, this doesn’t always work. The meat may not cure all the way through and, even if it does, may not turn that nice shade of pink.

What you need is a magic extra ingredient, a nitrite mixed into the salt. For a long time, saltpetre (potassium nitrate) was used, a highly toxic substance that can be dangerous if it is not mixed in the right proportions. It is no longer sold freely as it can be used in bomb-making.

The best alternatives these days are sodium nitrate and sodium nitrite, available at butchers’ supply shops online such as [www.weschenfelder.co.uk](http://www.weschenfelder.co.uk), or pre-mixed in the salt (the 2kg Supracure mix, £6, is sufficient for

curing up to 40kg of meat). With nitrates and nitrites, the actual curing process only takes four days in the fridge – and you can customise the mix with herbs, flavourings or sugar for a Christmassy finish.

Once you've selected your cut – “true” hams are made from the hind legs, but at a time of year when the fridge is already full with Christmas goodies, it might be more practical to start with a simpler, smaller cut, such as a loin – it's time to get curing.

I had assumed there would be some dark juju involved. But, as Jim showed me at his shop, it couldn't be simpler. All you actually need to do is rub the cure mix into the meat, pop it in a plastic bag, and leave in the fridge for four to five days.

After curing one piece of pork at the shop, I tried one at home, just to be sure I had the hang of it. You have to take the ham out of the bag every 24 hours, drain off any liquid and re-rub in any cure that has fallen off. But after four days, my 1kg piece of pork had gone a lovely pink colour – exactly like the ones at the butcher's.

Made this way, dry-cure hams are far less salty than their wet-cured cousins, so they don't need to be soaked before cooking. Simply boil your ham for an hour per kilo in the biggest pot you own, before popping it into the oven at 180C with a sugary glaze for another hour. Leave it to cool for at least half an hour before tucking in, and prepare to be amazed.

Because, whichever way you serve it – hot, cold, or in the pot, seven days old – it'll be the finest ham you ever eat.

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