

Country Curing Hams

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Many people like the flavor of hams that have been cured country style. Their characteristic flavor is quite different from mild-cured commercial hams.

When to cure

Hams should be placed in cure during December and January when production of country cured hams is dependent on natural conditions for refrigeration. This will help ensure production of sound cured and aged hams that will have acquired their characteristic flavor and aroma by midsummer. Unless mechanical refrigeration is available, hams should not be placed in cure after January. Depending on their size, hams need 30 to 40 days of cool weather (less than 40 degrees Fahrenheit night temperature) to prevent spoilage.

The fresh product

To cure hams country style, begin with fresh hams that have been chilled to about 40 degrees Fahrenheit within 24 to 30 hours after slaughter. If the source of hams is a commercial packing plant, this requirement is usually met. If the source of hams is farm slaughter, take care to chill the carcasses as rapidly as possible. Regardless of the source, apply cure within 48 hours after slaughter. Before the cure is added, trim the hams of excess fat and bevel to the desired shape, being careful not to expose any more lean than necessary.

Curing ingredients

Salt is the primary curing agent, but sugar is added to offset some of the harshness of the salt. Other ingredients, such as black pepper, red pepper and ground cloves, are sometimes added to give a characteristic flavor, aroma and color. Saltpeter (potassium nitrate) is traditionally used to aid with color development, flavor and preservation.

Curing mixtures

A basic curing mixture

- 2 pounds salt (non-iodized)
- 1 pound sugar (white or brown)
- 1 ounce saltpeter (optional)

Mix thoroughly.

Another successful recipe

- 2 cups salt
- 8 tablespoons light brown sugar
- 4 tablespoons black pepper
- 2 tablespoons red pepper
- 1/2 teaspoon saltpeter

Mix thoroughly.

Applying the curing mixture

The curing mixture should be applied at the rate of 1-1/4 ounces per pound of ham. Follow these steps:

- Apply the cure to the ham by opening the hock end and forcing three tablespoons of cure into the opening. This gets the cure to the joint in the middle of the ham, which decreases the chance of bone sour or spoiling.

- Frost the skin side with cure and place the ham in the proper position on wrapping paper.
- Place the remaining cure on the cut surface of the ham.
- Wrap the paper tightly and smoothly around the ham to hold the cure in place, and place it in a stockinette. Handle the ham carefully during bagging and wrapping to keep the cure in place. You can leave the ham on a table or shelf until the cure is wet, which helps keep the cure in place. This usually takes 1 day.

Caution

Moisture must escape from the hams — do not use plastic or waxed paper for wrapping.

Hang the ham shank down in a well-ventilated area. We do not recommend moist areas such as basements and cellars.

Allow the hams to cure 2-1/2 days per pound of ham. If the hams freeze during curing, allow one additional day for each day they are frozen.

Preparation for aging

At the end of the curing time (minimum of 2-1/2 days per pound of fresh ham), unwrap and remove any excess cure and mold. Use vinegar and a cloth to remove mold. Blot dry and apply a light covering of vegetable oil to retard mold development. Curing is usually complete around April 1.

Aging

Hams should be aged for three to six months to acquire their characteristic flavor. The variation in temperature during the spring and summer enhances the flavor. You can leave the hams wrapped for aging. If the area is well-ventilated, you can leave them where they were cured for the aging period.

Caution

Age the hams hanging in a stockinette shank down. This position helps improve the shape and conformation and permits better moisture drainage.

Smoking

In Texas, most country cured hams are not smoked; however, some people desire the smoked flavor and color. For smoking, the hams should be unwrapped after curing time. Remove any excess curing mixture and any mold growth by brushing with a stiff brush and rinsing with cold water. Smoke hams so that heat does not exceed 85 to 90 degrees Fahrenheit. Use hardwood logs or sawdust as the source of smoke. Don't use resinous woods such as evergreens for smoking. After smoking, rewrap the hams and hang for aging.

General protective measures

Cured hams must be protected from insects and rodents. The doors and windows should be screened with 32-mesh screen and all cracks sealed.

However, if the hams are completely wrapped so that the entire ham is covered with paper as described, the insect-proof storage area is not necessary. No insecticide is approved for spraying or brushing on the meat or on tabletops or meat shelves where meat is likely to make contact. Therefore, good sanitation is essential in all phases of ham curing. Hams should be examined at least monthly for insect or rodent damage.

Preparation for showing

If the ham is to be displayed, prepare it as follows:

- After aging, unwrap and remove any mold growth. This may be done either by washing in warm water and blotting dry or by using a stiff bristled brush, followed by rubbing with a cloth or sponge dampened with vinegar.
- When the ham is cleaned, remove the part of the aitchbone that is above the meat surface. You will improve appearance if you saw about 1 inch off the shank. You may want to do other trimming to improve the overall appearance. Rub the entire ham with a light coat of vegetable oil. A light covering of paprika may be applied.

Points considered in judging hams include:

- Eye appeal
- Color
- Smoothness of skin
- Fitting
- Trim
- Firmness
- Meatiness
- Aroma

Meatiness, or lean-to-fat ratio, and aroma are the most important characteristics.

Cooking country ham

Once the ham is aged, prepare it for cooking by removing excess cure and any mold that grew during aging. The two common methods of cooking country ham are frying and baking.

To fry, slice the ham approximately 1/4-inch thick. Cook slowly and turn often. Don't overcook. If ham is unusually lean, add some fat to the skillet. Some people prefer to fry the center slices and bake the shank and butt portions.

To bake a whole ham or the portions, simmer (don't boil) in water for 20 to 25 minutes per pound of ham. Then take the ham out of the water, remove the skin, place it in the roasting pan with the fat side up, and bake it uncovered at 275 degrees Fahrenheit until the internal temperature of the ham is 155 degrees Fahrenheit. A pineapple-clove garnish or other garnishes or glazes may be used on the ham during or after baking.