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WHAM BAM CHRISTMAS HAM

Ham has regained its place as the centrepiece of festive dining. *LINDY ALEXANDER* asks experts in the field for their tips on selecting, preparing and glazing the perfect one

CHAMPION HAM The overall winner of best Australian ham, Westridge Meats in Toowoomba, which also won best boneless ham. Best bone-in leg ham went to Noosa Meat Centre in Noosaville. For the recipe for this spiced cherry and maple glaze, go to delicious.com.au

There are few things as festive as a Christmas ham. Whether studded with cloves, basted with sticky syrup or served plump and pink with its dark skin, ham is undeniably the king of the feast.

"Ham is the centrepiece of a table," says Mitch Edwards from Australian Pork. "Visually, a ham can be decorated to say Christmas. In contrast, roast pork or turkey doesn't have that wow factor."

If you're dedicated, you can buy fresh pork then brine and boil it yourself. But most of us will buy ham that is cured, cooked, smoked and ready to eat - all we have to do is add the finishing touches.

But there is still much to consider: a whole ham or half? Bone-in or boneless? Glazed or natural? We consulted the experts to ensure you get the most out of your Christmas ham.

WEIGHTY MATTERS

Think about how many people you need to cater for. "An average ham is about 10kg and that would feed a whole tribe!" says Edwards. "But people shouldn't be afraid to buy a half ham, as that will still feed at least 10 people."

PRICE FIXING

"The range for a ham tends to be between \$70 and \$150," says Edwards.

Free range or speciality breeds are typically more expensive.

"The origin of the ham will affect the price," adds Edwards. "Artisan producers will do a product that is the best quality rather than the best profit."

PATRIOTIC PORK

Legs of ham on the bone cannot be imported into Australia, but you need to exercise caution if you're buying boneless ham as it can be imported. The pink square PorkMark logo shows ham made with fresh Australian pork.

SMOKING POINT

Most hams are smoked, and a dark colour on the skin is an indication it has been naturally wood-smoked.

"Some companies use liquid smoke, which results in a lighter skin and you don't have a strong flavour," says Alastair Stevenson from Gilly's Smallgoods in Clontarf, Queensland. The colour of the meat should be an even pink, and if you buy a half ham, check the bag is sealed tightly without too much moisture.

"If you're going to bake it, you'll also want a ham that has more fat coverage, so it won't dry out," says Stevenson.

TASTE TEST

A good butcher will often let you sample ham before you make your decision. Think about the balance of salt and smoke, the texture and succulence.

John Yeo from Westridge Meats in Toowoomba, Queensland, which recently won the 2016 Best Australian Ham award from Australian Pork, says it's also important to note the aftertaste. "You want some saltiness and sweetness to linger after you've eaten it," he says.

GLAZE OF THUNDER

Glazes are back in a big way, and tender, salty ham is perfect with a sweet glaze.

"There's nothing better than sitting down to Christmas lunch with a honey mustard glaze melting into the ham," says Yeo. Glazing adds sweetness, but remember you're basting it, not cooking it, so take care not to dry out the meat.

"You want to get the fat and skin crackly and succulent," Matt Wilkinson, chef and co-owner of Pope Joan in Melbourne, says. "There are so many glazes - cloves and mustard powder, wine and honey or a taste of the Caribbean with coconut and pineapple."

In the northern hemisphere, citrus glazes are popular, according to Cuban-American chef Danielle Alvarez of Sydney restaurant Fred's. "An orange or tangerine glaze with a bit of sage is great," she says. "And for Australia, pineapple works so well. But really anything sweet with ham is delicious."

LEFTOVER INSPIRATION

Unlike most of the presents under the tree, ham is the gift that keeps on giving. Refrigerated in a calico ham bag, it can last up to four weeks. Most people dampen the bag with vinegar first, but Stevenson says a dry tea towel or pillowcase works equally well.

Wilkinson likes to see the extravagance of Christmas put to good use after the main event. "You can use ham in so many different ways to make sure there's no waste," he says. "Make an omelette with feta and ham for brunch, put it through stir-fried rice or make a beautiful stock with the bone and use it in a ham risotto."

Alvarez can't go past an old favourite, albeit with a twist. "A ham sandwich with cranberry chutney on a soft potato roll is just so good," she says.

Wilkinson has a final tip on how to ham things up. "Everyone needs to wear a really stupid jumper on Christmas day," he laughs. "I've got mine already." ★



COLIN FASSNIDGE'S PINEAPPLE GLAZED HAM

SERVES 10-12

- 425g can pineapple pieces in juice
- 3 cups (750ml) apple juice
- 2 firmly packed cups (500g) brown sugar
- 2 cinnamon quills
- 4 star anise
- 1 tsp fennel seeds
- 5cm piece ginger (25g), finely grated
- 1 tsp five-spice powder
- 6-7kg whole leg ham on the bone

Place all the ingredients, except the ham, in a saucepan over medium heat. Stir to dissolve sugar, then bring to the boil. Reduce heat to medium and simmer for 30 minutes or until reduced by half. Strain the glaze into a heatproof jug, discarding solids.

Preheat the oven to 200°C. Line a large shallow roasting pan with baking paper. Using a small sharp knife, cut around the ham shank, then carefully run the knife under the skin, around the edge of the ham. Gently lift off the skin in 1 piece by running your fingers between the rind and the fat. Discard skin.

Pour half the glaze into the roasting pan then place the ham fat-side down on top of the glaze. Pour over the remaining glaze and roast ham for 40 minutes, then carefully turn the ham over and baste with the glaze. Roast, basting every 10-15 minutes, for a further 40 minutes until caramelised.

Remove the ham from the baking dish and place on a serving platter. Spoon any remaining glaze over ham.

For more Christmas entertaining ideas, go to delicious.com.au