

## Chicago Tribune

# Italian-inspired hog heaven



L.A. Times photo by Steve Pope  
Herb Eckhouse ages his prosciutto in a custom-built plant in Norwalk, Iowa. Instead of using a whole rear leg, his company, La Quercia, uses a select cut of the rear leg muscles called culaccia.



L.A. Times photo by Ken Hively  
The American-made prosciutto is gentle and creamy with a deep, earthy resonance.

You have to wait. And it's about the same amount of time."

In February, 2005, they opened their immaculate plant, custom-built for prosciutto-making. When the fresh meat arrives on Mondays and Fridays, it is carefully massaged with sea salt, something Kathy Eckhouse calls "a sacramental process"—after all, salt is what makes possible the alchemy of cured meat.

### Salting is crucial

"The salting in a lot of ways is the most important point," Kathy said. "You put on too little salt and it'll spoil; too much salt and it'll be a salt bomb."

The meat is then transferred to cold rooms with special jets and fans to keep the air constantly circulating, and then warm rooms in which part of the hams are coated with a *sugna*, a mixture of pork fat, pepper and flour (the Eckhouses use corn flour for an Iowa touch) that protects them and slows moisture loss. Occasionally, vents in the ceiling are opened to let in the air of the surrounding prairie.

After the hams have aged for a minimum of eight months, they're a beautiful palate of deep red, pink and caramel.

Instead of a whole rear leg, La Quercia uses a select cut of the rear leg muscles (what in Italy makes up the prized cured meat *culatello*) called *culaccia*, "which in Italy would be called 'big butt'" Kathy said, laughing. "That's not the most attractive term: 'Try our 'big butt' prosciutto!'"

The cut, which has neither the shank nor the knuckle, has a final weight of 6 to 8 pounds, far

smaller than a standard prosciutto and easier to handle. And unlike most prosciutto, it isn't pressed into shape, which leaves it with an open and languorous texture.

They also make speck (smoked prosciutto), pancetta (spiced, unsmoked bacon) and guanciale (the dry-cured jowl that's traditionally used for spaghetti carbonara).

At Panozzo's Italian Market in the South Loop, which carries almost the whole line of La Quercia products, chef and manager John Asbaty said that the prosciutto has more marbling than Italian prosciutto.

"The texture tends to be even more buttery, which is impressive," he said.

"Not to knock prosciutto di Parma, but we're getting people who come in and specifically request La Quercia."

(Panozzo's, 1303 S. Michigan Ave., 312-356-9966, carries almost all of La Quercia's products, including the heirloom La Quercia rossa for \$23 per pound and the prosciutto Americano for \$22 per pound. Some products also are sold on the Eckhouses' Web site, [laquercia.us](http://laquercia.us).)

Early on, Kathy said, it was easy to be beset by doubts, Kathy said.

In late 2005, when their first round of prosciutto was finished, "we had all these hundreds of hams and all this money that we've invested, and we thought, 'What if it isn't any good?'"

Herb and I took a walk around the plant and Herb was saying to the hams, 'Be delicious, be delicious.'"

The hams listened.

[ctc-goodeating@tribune.com](mailto:ctc-goodeating@tribune.com)