

# FOOD thought



with Dr. Tamsyn Murray

**If you want to be happy for a week, get married. If you want to be happy for a month, kill a pig, and if you want to be happy for a lifetime, plant a garden.**

As last month we talked about planting a garden, I thought this month I would explain the joys of processing a pig. But don't worry, you may go to the butcher and buy a piece to try this at home. Understanding the story behind your fried bacon or ham sandwich highlights the ethics of our food choices more so than any other meat. There exists such a stark and confronting difference between the free-range pig foraging out in the paddock and the highly intensive system of sheds filled with pigs in pens. Our choices regarding which pork we buy affect first the type of farming system and farmer/processor we wish to support, and second, our health.

A few years back when my parents were visiting from Canada, they asked my 10-year-old daughter what she would like to be when she grows up. She answered without hesitation... "I'd like to be a butcher". My parents were stunned. I explained she wanted to have her own shop where she would make artisanal meats and cheeses produced from animals that live a good life. My daughter loves the whole process of taking an animal and transforming it into food. It is a creative process that involves a deep respect for the animal.



**These sausages were made with the help of a friend who claimed the recipe was specific to her village in southern Italy and had been passed down for generations.**

Pigs have been by far the most interesting of animals for us to raise and process. For the past five years we have processed a pig each year. The pig was raised on a spare field and fed the scraps from all the nearby families. Much has changed since this model of locally crafted artisanal meat and a happy life for each pig. Artisanal meats have been replaced by our industrial food system where efficiency and the drive for the cheapest possible ingredients dictate how we process food. Most artisans use nitrate-free curing, or a natural cure from celery which means a slower cure and a truer meat flavour. Industrial meat processing uses nitrates to speed up the curing process, to destroy bacteria, and to give the meat a pinkish

## Ham and bacon like no other

colour. However sodium nitrate converts to nitrite in the curing process and both nitrate and nitrite become nitrosamines when digested - nitrosamines are a suspected carcinogen.

It changed our lives when we made our first ham and bacon. It is a bit like the sourdough bread, you believe it is too hard and complicated and can only be done by an expert and then when you make it yourself you discover how incredibly simple it is and how different it tastes. And you have the added satisfaction of doing it yourself.

### OUR RECIPE FOR DRY CURED HAM AND BACON

We use the belly and middle for the bacon pieces as they are streaked with fat and we use the loin and other less fatty pieces for the ham. The pieces for the ham should not be more than 10cm thick. There should be no bones.

### A FEW SIMPLE STEPS

Make your dry mixture. We do two to one raw sugar to coarse salt. If there is too much salt, the meat is too salty. We add peppercorns and juniper berries. Mix all the ingredients. Place the pork into a big tub of the sugar-salt mixture. Rub the mixture vigorously all over the pork, massage it into the cracks of the meat. Then place the pieces skin down in a second tub and cover it with the rest of the mixture. You need to have enough mixture to completely cover the meat. Leave in a cool place (can be the fridge).

When you return at about the same time the next day you will see in the bottom of the tub all the moisture that has been absorbed by the mixture.



**This is a sugar and salt mixture as we are rubbing it over the meat.**

Remove all the pieces and place them in a new tub. Discard the really wet mixture. Rub them all over with the mixture again and cover as before. Depending on how wet the mixture is, we usually add more salt and sugar. The mixture needs to be dry enough to absorb the moisture in the meat. Each day you will see the meat changing colour as well as texture. It becomes darker and harder, and there will be less moisture in the tub. We usually leave the meat in the mixture for three-five days, each day rubbing it and adding more mixture if needed. The thinner pieces will cure faster than the fatter ones, so you can remove those first.

On the last day we remove all the pieces, rinse the mixture off the meat and allow it to air dry in a cool place for a few hours. We then hot smoke the meat. We set the temperature at 60-80 degrees celsius and leave it in there for about six-eight hours. Do not allow the meat to dry out too much or overcook. The thinner pieces should be removed sooner. When you remove all the meat, allow it to cool, and cryovac and place in the freezer. The bacon you obviously fry as there is a lot of fat in it, however we eat the dry ham raw, sliced very thinly. It tastes incredible, and because the meat pieces are quite thin, it has a pinkish tinge and is moist and tender.

Give it a try and make sure you buy from a truly free-range pig farmer, buy local and buy direct.



**Jess making sausages with our mobile butcher Russell.**

### RESOURCES

Matthew Evan's *Gourmet Farmer* has many excellent recipes for making your own sausages, ham and bacon and his other book, *The Real Food Companion*, is about his passion for fine food created from produce grown ethically.

Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall's *Meat Book* and *River Cottage* series are an inspiration for learning about meat and how best to process it. Also *River Cottage* has online pig and pork course, and online pig forum [www.sausages-madesimple.com.au](http://www.sausages-madesimple.com.au)

**The way Pigs should live.....  
The way Christmas should taste**

**Berkshire Ham on the Bone**

*Full and Half Legs available*

*Order Online*

**[www.mcivorfarmfoods.com.au](http://www.mcivorfarmfoods.com.au)**

Also at Lancefield, Woodend and Riddells Creek Farmers Markets

