

Assisting at a Miracle: Herb and Kathy Eckhouse of La Quercia Help Italian Tradition Find a Home in Norwalk



Story and photos by Kurt Michael Friese

The succulent delicacy known as prosciutto is sometimes called “A pig’s leap toward immortality.” A successful jump, when you consider that the first documentation of the process is credited to Cato and dated to around 100 BC.

Back then, pork legs were buried in barrels of salt to cure, then smoked and air-dried. As the process was refined over the centuries, the burying and smoking aspects were abandoned. The prosciutto we know today is made with only pork, salt, and time.

Across all those centuries, the only place one could find authentic prosciutto was in Italy. In fact, it was found only in a few select parts of Italy—notably Parma and San Danielle. Other places made similar products, such as Spain’s delicious jamón, and modern industrial meatpackers began making a ham product they called prosciutto in the mid-twentieth century, but it was only the vaguest shadow of its royal ancestor. No one could quite equal the prowess of the Italian original—until now.

Herb and Kathy Eckhouse opened La Quercia Prosciuttificio in 2005, after years of research and practice. Kathy once worked as a ranch hand, and then as a researcher in Agricultural Economics at the University of California at Berkeley.

The name La Quercia, (pronounced La Kwair-cha, with a slight roll of the “r”—if you can do it),

is the Italian term for “The Oak.” It has particular symbolism for the product, for its origins, and for Iowa. The oak tree is the symbol of the Italian region of Parma, Prosciutto’s ancestral home. It is also the source of the acorns used to feed the pigs there, which give Prosciutto di Parma its unique flavor. The Oak is also the state tree of Iowa, another world capital of pork. It seemed predestined that the traditions of the old world would find a home here on the edge of the Great Plains.

The La Quercia dream began in 2000. The Eckhouse’s vision was to make a prosciutto of their own, but in the meantime, they began by importing the prosciutto of one of the best Prosciutto makers in Parma. This helped them learn some of the ropes, build a distribution network, and work on the financing of their new plant in Norwalk, just south of Des Moines.

They also began experimenting with homemade hams of their own. Using techniques they had learned in Parma and making adjustments for the meat that was raised close to home, they closed in on the perfect combination. Making prosciutto is a slow process. It is not, as some major American cold-cut producers would have us believe, simply adding extra salt and pressing a cheap traditional American ham. There are no nitrates or nitrites to preserve it. The methods used in Parma, and now in Norwalk, have been refined by centuries of necessity. Refrigeration is a new process. For most of human existence we have had to preserve our meat through a myriad of curing, drying, and smoking techniques. The cultures around the Mediterranean were the best at it; from the cured Italian fatback known as lardo to the Spanish bacalao, or salt cod, there are thousands of them, and prosciutto could well be considered the king.

The process begins with the carefully trimmed ham, or hind leg, of the pig and echoes the seasonal cycle (winter, spring, and summer) followed for generations. It is salted and allowed to rest on one side in a cool place. After weeks in the cold (winter), the salt is rinsed off and the ham is hung to dry and develop its flavor in very specific climatic conditions for months.

You’ll notice that a lot was left out of that process. Trimmed how? What kind of salt? Cured for how long? What temperatures? What specific climatic conditions? Well, if you can get that kind of information out of a Prosciutto Maker, then you are surprisingly more persuasive than I. Techniques are zealously guarded from family to family.

Everything they do at La Quercia seems based on love: for the animals, for the art, for the product, and for each other. Respect for the animals is paramount, and La Quercia buys only high quality Berkshires—both organic and not (the organics cost a little more but are worth it)—for their hams.

Herb and Kathy have transported this classic fare from its origins in the Italian countryside to the heartland prairie where it has found a new home and new fans among America's modern farmers. This in turn provides a new market for the sustainable pork producers who supply La Quercia, and a local source for an imported delicacy.

For more information on La Quercia proscuitto, visit the [Edible Iowa River Valley website](#).

Posted by Bruce Cole on March 26, 2007 11:27 AM | [Permalink](#)