

LIVES

Parma of the Plains

A couple in Iowa are giving the prosciutto makers of Italy a run for their money

BY CHRISTOPHER HALL

DAWN BREAKS CLEAR over Norwalk, Iowa, casting a thin, uncertain light across the landscape. But inside La Quercia Artisan Cured Meats, a boxy, steel-framed building overlooking this Des Moines suburb where new housing tracts meet cornfields, a long day's labor has already begun for Herb and Kathy Eckhouse.

Wearing white hairnets and gloves, they work with three of their employees to salt more than 500 fresh, locally produced hams that were delivered yesterday afternoon. Vulnerable to tearing, each ham must be held from underneath, like a fat, pink baby, as it's carried to a table for a careful sprinkling of sea salt—too much, and the ham will taste like a salt lick; not enough, and it will rot. It is work that neither Herb, a former corporate executive, nor Kathy, a homemaker, ever expected to be doing in their mid-50s. But that's what happens when a pipe dream becomes reality; in this case, the dream was to transform Iowa pork into a prosciutto to rival the celebrated Italian hams of Parma and San Daniele.

Originally the products of a home business started by the Eckhouses in 2000, La Quercia hams are becoming notable in the world of American artisanal foods. Though the company also produces pancetta, the undisputed stars of the show are its hams, made from humanely raised pigs, including an organic prosciutto and a Berkshire ham culaccia—the Eckhouses' take on an Italian cut of ham taken from the rear of the leg. (The latter is the first breed-specific dry-cured ham in America.) All are boneless, unpressed hams that are cured with nothing other than salt,

according to traditional Italian methods, which the Eckhouses adapted for the corn- and soybean-fed hogs they use.

Some people are born to a mission; others, like the Eckhouses, discover theirs only after a lot of living. "I grew up in a Jewish household outside Chicago, so pork wasn't exactly a staple of my childhood," says Herb. He met his future wife during a post-college hitchhiking trip out West; her cousin had given him a lift and persuaded him to come to the Idaho ranch where Kathy, the daughter of an artist and a Berkeley academic, was working. She'd landed there after university in California, England, and Idaho, a gig as a London au pair, and a stint with a lay order of nuns in Italy. After getting married, Herb and Kathy lived near San Francisco while he studied business and worked for a bank and she did agricultural economic research. They relocated to Des Moines when Herb was offered a job as an assistant comptroller at Pioneer Hi-Bred, the Iowa seed company founded in 1926 by a populist businessman and politician named Henry Wallace.

Prosciutto might never have entered the Eckhouses' lives—indeed, become their lives—had it not been for what Kathy calls simply "the move". In 1985, after just four years at Pioneer, Herb was transferred to Parma to head the company's operations in Italy. "I honestly don't think I'd ever tasted prosciutto before then," says Kathy, who has sparkling blue eyes. By the end of their more than three-year stay and with Kathy expecting their third child, they were eating prosciutto twice a day, five days a week.

For both Herb and Kathy, the Parma years were an education. "We always enjoyed good food," says Herb, as he stands in a darkened room where hundreds of curing hams hang in perfect symmetry, like a porcine corps de ballet. "But what really struck us was how the Italians cook and eat—the importance of simple, high-quality ingredients. I became absolutely passionate about prosciutto, and I was especially interested in the miraculous way that two ingredients, pork and salt, can become so intensely perfumed and flavored over time. It's like alchemy."

The 1999 sale of Pioneer, one of the last independent major American seed companies, to the chemical conglomerate DuPont proved to be a turning point. "I was 50 years old and had worked at Pioneer since my early 30s," recalls Herb, a lean man with a thatch of unruly, graying hair. "It was a company I believed in. But with that sale, Pioneer became just another giant corporation obsessed with profits. I could feel myself dying there, and I knew I had to get out."

Herb took early retirement, and in 2000 he and Kathy formed La Quercia—the name is Italian for oak tree, a symbol of the province of Parma and, coincidentally, the state tree of Iowa—and began to im-



Prosciutto hams aging at La Quercia's factory in Norwalk, Iowa.

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port prosciutto. Having learned that no artisanal-quality prosciutto was then being produced commercially in the United States, he also researched the possibility of making and selling their own, an idea that had started to take root after the couple's return from Italy.

"There are far more hogs than people in Iowa," he says, "but all that Iowans had done in the past was ship our best raw materials out of state. I wanted to add some value to those products. I thought it would be good for Iowa and for the farmers here. But Kathy and I also realized pretty early on that we didn't want to simply make a Parma ham. We wanted a ham that would reflect the high quality of our local products, one that could be an American standard-bearer alongside the great hams of Europe."

In 2002, after gaining firsthand knowledge and industry contacts in Parma through La Quercia's import business, Herb began to make prosciutto. Using the Eckhouses' split-level home in Des Moines as a ham lab, he tried out different breeds of pork and ways of trimming, salting, and curing it. "There were hams in the garage, hams in the basement," says Kathy. "Sometimes, when the weather was nice, Herb would take a rolling rack of his hams outside for a walk in the fresh air to see how it would affect the curing process. Some of the neighbors thought we were pretty strange."

At the time, many U.S. producers were eager to capitalize on Americans' appetite for prosciutto di Parma (which in 1989 became the first Italian ham to be imported to the U.S. and now accounts for 90 percent of the \$100 million worth of Italian ham brought into the country each year). They took pains to reproduce the methods used in Parma, which include curing for at least 12 months, feeding the pigs a whey-based diet, and pressing the hams into the distinctive, chicken leg Parma shape. But the Eckhouses concluded they were more interested in finding techniques that best brought out the qualities of the local meat. They also experimented with other dry-cured hams, like smoked speck and culaccia. For the latter, they opted for fuller-flavored (and more expensive) Berkshire hogs, whose short muscle fiber yields a silkier, glossier ham than those made with standard, leaner breeds.

The February 2005 opening of the Norwalk plant launched the Eckhouses into the world of prosciutto in a big way. Each year, 25,000 fresh hams purchased from various farms undergo the transformation into prosciutto, progressing through six rooms where state-of-the-art equipment—the same kind as that now used by many

Italian producers—replicates the temperatures, humidity, and wind conditions of the winter-through-summer curing cycle that has traditionally dictated the dry-curing of hams in much of western Europe. The first two rooms, where just-salted meat is held for a week, are as cold and damp as a northern Italian December and have a distinctly sweet aroma. In another room—its climate corresponding roughly to that of early spring—fans create cool winds, while in the last room, where hams ripen like fine cheese in warmer and drier conditions, the air smells strongly of late-summer apples.

FOR THE ECKHOUSES, the plant opening provided at least a semblance of normal home life. "With the business at home, we could never escape," Kathy says. "Either there was prosciutto to work to do or housework. We spend a lot of time at the plant—I work about 40 hours a week, and Herb puts in upwards of 70." When reminded that many, if not most, husbands and wives couldn't spend so much time together without entertaining an occasional ill thought, she laughs. "Sure, there have been sensitive moments. But when we first met, we farmed side by side, all day long. In many ways, we're children of the '60s. Both of us grew up thinking that our lives could be a seamless whole aimed toward some greater good, whether it's raising our kids or making prosciutto."

The nearly 10,000-square-foot, \$2 million plant, however, does pose a new challenge. "This is a huge risk," says Kathy, who admits to having had sleepless nights. "We were essentially a debt-free family, and suddenly I'm writing these monster checks every month to banks. What if there's a malfunction at the plant? What if we can't get the distribution we need? It's kind of scary."

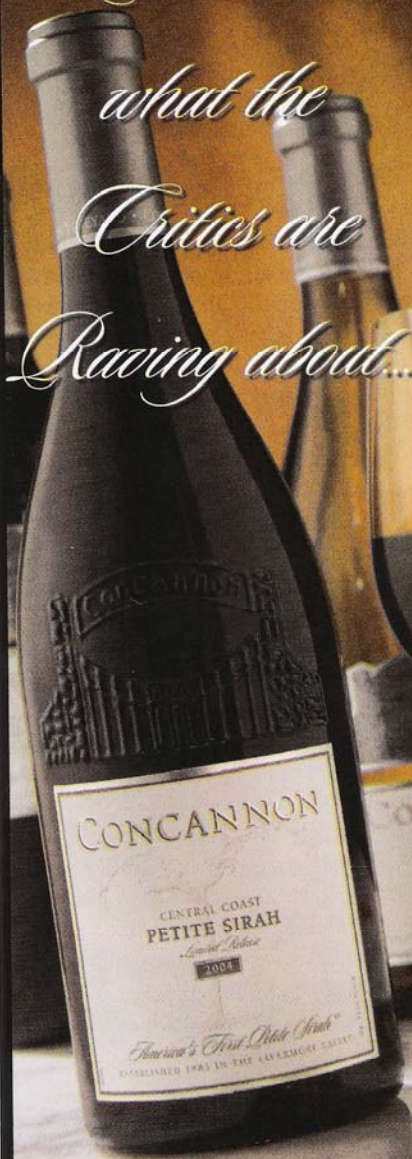
"Those first weeks were stressful," Herb recalls. "There were problems with the trim and with getting the refrigeration right, and our Italian consultant, Giorgio, kept yelling at me. But after the first hams were salted, he and I went into the room where they were curing. This beatific look came over his face, and he said, in Italian, 'How beautiful—they're pissing!' which is an expression they use in Parma to describe the way they drip as they cure. The smell in that room, fresh and sweet, was the same one I'd smelled so often in Parma, and it made me feel everything was going to be okay. I whispered to the hams, 'Be delicious. Just be delicious.'" And they were. 🍷

THE PANTRY, page 100: Information on how to order La Quercia products.



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