

Jamon, Jamon

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Spanish Tit-Bits



There are some things that Spain has given the world that we have to be truly thankful for. Picasso, Paco de Lucia, the siesta and flamenco just to begin with, and that is before you get to the gastronomy. With its wonderfully fresh produce, Spain is regarded as being at the forefront of modern cuisine. As any chef will tell you, it is all about the quality of the ingredients, and there is no better example of this quality than jamón ibérico: “Iberian ham”.

“Iberian Ham” is as far away from the ham that you add to your cheese sandwich as the Valderrama golf course is to Crazy Golf. The acorn fed Iberian pigs that produce the ham are entirely native to Spain. A completely different breed to the Duroc pigs that provide jamón serrano, Iberian pigs have a dark grey and black colouring, with jet-black hooves. Which is where the term “pata negra” – black hoof comes from.

(As an aside, don’t make the mistake of making “pata” masculine as I once did, when I ordered “pato negro”. If the waiter hadn’t corrected me, I might have ended up with a plate of black duck – “pato”).

The history of the jamón ibérico deigns when the Phoenicians first settled on the Iberian Peninsula and brought their domesticated pigs with them. These pigs crossbred with local wild boars, giving birth to the Iberian pig. When the Romans conquered Iberia, they brought the curing process that they had witnessed in their German colonies. The result was immediately popular, with Roman scholars praising the quality of the hams.

Needless to say, interest in ham eating ceased during the 700 years of Islamic Moorish Spain. After the “Reconquista” of 1492, however, with the Christian King and Queen Ferdinand and Isabella back in charge, ham eating became a de facto symbol of the new Spain.

To produce the jamon iberico, the piglets are fattened on a diet of barley, before being released onto the “dehesa”, farmland that has oak forests, wild herbs and grass. They are free to graze - and they do, eating up to 20 kilos of acorns every day. This has two side effects; a much higher fat-to-meat ratio than other pigs and, due to the large amount of acorns scooped, the pigs absorb oleic acid; the same fatty acid found in olive oil and which share some of the same health benefits. The flavour of the acorns also permeates into the meat, giving it a delicate and unique flavour.

In order to ensure the quality of the jamón, the Spanish government controls the production and sale of ham. All Iberian hams have a tag just above the hoof, with a black tag signifying that it has come from a pig that is 100% genetically Iberian, has roamed the dehesa, eaten an acorn-based diet and been cured for a minimum of 36 months.

In addition to this, the E.U. recognises only four protected appellations of Spanish ham.

In the same way that Spanish wine and olive oil are designated, these four protected regions are the only places in Spain that are legally allowed to make acorn-fed Iberian ham.

They are:

D.O.P. Jabugo: From Andalucia, in the foothills northwest of Seville.

D.O.P. Extremadura: The newest denomination, this covers the dehesas around Badajoz and Caceres.

D.O.P. Los Pedroches: Andalucia again, near Cordoba.

D.O.P Guijuelo: The region that produces 60% of Spain’s jamón ibérico de bellota. Surrounding Salamanca in Extremadura, Castilla y Leon, Castilla La Mancha, and parts of Andalucia.

With such a time consuming process, jamón ibérico does not come cheap. You can expect to pay anything upwards of €20 for a plate. But when you consider the lives that the Iberian pigs lead, contentedly grazing free on a diet of acorns, raise a glass as you take your first bite and reflect on the fact that these pigs in Spain are, in fact, happier “than pigs in sh...”