





PROSCIUTTO DI SAN DANIELE

A centuries-old culinary marvel from
Italy's northeast corner

BY LEE SMITH

ALL PHOTOS BY MARCO COVI
PROSCIUTTO PHOTOS TAKEN AT PRINCIPE DI SAN DANIELE S.P.A.



Located in northeast Italy is the autonomous region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia. This unique area, first settled by Celtic tribes and later alternating between Italian and Eastern European rule, is a melting pot of cultures. The flavors of Friuli reflect the heritages of its people — air-cured hams, some of the best white wines in the world, unique cheeses and baked goods reminiscent of the fine pastries of Vienna.

The city of Trieste, one of the most important ports in Europe, lies in the southern part of the region at the end of a narrow strip of land lying between the Adriatic Sea and the border with Slovenia. Throughout history, Trieste has been at the crossroads of Germanic, Latin, Hungarian and Slavic cultures. Consequently, the area's cuisine exhibits the influences of many cultures and, of course, the sea.

The area of San Daniele in the province of Udine boasts one of the world's great delicacies — a unique air-dried ham — often called cured ham — known as prosciutto di San Daniele. Sweet, nutty and delicate, it's one of Italy's protected denomination of origin — PDO — products and is available in this country from a number of producers. Here in the States, Principe, which is located in the city of San Daniele, is the best-known producer.

Prosciutto di San Daniele is one of the very few specialties for which it is a culinary crime to do anything but eat it as is — in this case, in paper-thin slices. Of course, it pairs beautifully with a dry, white Friulian wine, a little salad, maybe some fruit and a piece of cheese, but it should never be compromised by using it in a recipe or cooking it with, heaven forbid, eggs.

This is a treat to be enjoyed in its pristine glory. The ham is delicate and its silky texture, subtle aroma and nutty nuances will all be lost if adulterated in any way. It just can't be made better than it is in its natural state. It can be horribly ruined, however, at the hands of an incompetent clerk. When ordering San Daniele, go to a fine retailer and have it sliced to order to be consumed that day. If sliced-to-order is unavailable where you live, try the pre-packaged and pre-sliced products — they're excellent. Just remember, once the package is opened, the ham should be eaten quickly so it doesn't dry out or pick up refrigerator odors.

The best way to fully enjoy prosciutto is to take it out of the refrigerator a few minutes before serving so it can come to room temperature and release its aromas and flavors. If, per chance, you see tiny, solid granules, don't worry. They may look like salt, but they're actually tiny pieces of the amino acid tyrosine, completely harmless and a natural by-product created when proteins





age and an indicator of a long-aged ham. Those same granules are often found in aged cheese.

The significance of ham in Italy and central Europe can be compared to the significance of the olive tree in Mediterranean cuisine. In the “olive-oil watershed,” the part of Europe where olive oil reigns supreme, economics and anthropology have

created a food culture with distinct geographical boundaries. Those same influences can be seen in the areas that produce air-dried hams. The proliferation of pork and pork products can usually be traced to areas near great mountain ranges. Similar styles of ham are produced throughout the region, especially along the Po River valley. From Emilia, comes the famous prosciutto di Parma. Other areas producing their own air-dried hams according to their own recipes are Marche, Umbria, Tuscany, and the Veneto.

Prosciutto is one of the most natural products humans can make. It requires only three ingredients — the leg of carefully selected pigs, salt and clean mountain breezes. Very few products reflect as directly the relationship between the land and its inhabitants.

It was the Celts, early settlers of the Friuli region — a gentle race with roots in farming traditions — who early on mastered the art of using salt for the preservation of pork. And it was their technological breakthrough that eventually led to the air-dried hams of today.

While the low-lying pastures gave rise to sophisticated methods of raising pigs, the constant breezes of the mountains allowed the legs of pork to slowly dry and cure, creating a treat unrivaled in its quality.

Modern technology may advance some production methods, but San Daniele retains its character by relying on historic processes. The Consorzio del Prosciutto di San Daniele’s own manual, explains it this way:

San Daniele prosciutto is still made today in the traditional manner. Ham-making is a historic process rather than a craft skill. The term craft is relevant only if it refers to the scale of production and organization.

Words like technology and innovation are frequently used by San Daniele prosciutto producers, but they refer exclusively to company organization, goods handling and the mechanical aspects of industrial life. The production technique itself is unchanged. Progress serves only to render the working environment and the tools of production more rational and more functional.

San Daniele prosciutto is a traditional product because its taste and organoleptic properties are safeguarded and guaranteed by traditional production process and the source of its raw materials.







The Process

The traditional manufacturing process starts right at the beginning — with the animals. The pigs used to make San Daniele come from ten regions in the area. They must be one of the traditional species known as Italian Heavy Pigs. These include the Large White and Landrace breeds, which can be crossbred with Durocs. The piglets are branded at birth to ensure traceability starts from day one. From weaning until slaughter, the pigs are fed a very specific and local diet that is highly regulated. Antibiotics may never be used.

Principe recently started a new farm-to-field program to ensure world-class animal welfare standards by building its own breeding farm, Fattorie del Principe. Breeding choices are made to have the lowest impact on nature while maintaining the health of the animals. The pigs are raised in a natural environment in pens three times larger than required by the European Union's 2013 minimum standard. The space is designed to stop the need for tail docking and teeth grinding or clipping.

The process of turning the raw legs into the delicacy known as prosciutto di San Daniele is at once simple and complicated. Hundreds of years of tradition and the careful monitoring of modern science intertwine at every phase.

First, the legs are inspected; if they pass the quality-control standards of the independent Consorzio, the legs are hand-cut and salted. They're then left to cure in specially built chambers until they're ready to be eaten. Of course, the complete process has many steps, but basically, it's that simple.

The natural, clean, cool breezes of

the Alps aid in the drying. When prosciutto di San Daniele is described as air-dried, that is exactly what has happened. The hams are never cooked or artificially heated in any way. The salt and the air will bring the moisture levels down while allowing the meat to stay "soft" and luscious.

The hams must be aged for a minimum of 400 days but can be aged up to 20 months. At what age you like your ham is dependent on personal preferences. The longer a ham has been aged, the higher the price — but even in Italy, an individual's taste preference, not budget demands, is the determining factor.

At 14 months, the hams are sweet and fresh tasting, and the majority of all hams sold have been aged between 14 and 16 months. As they continue to age, the flavor becomes more concentrated, bolder and more aromatic.

Anyone interested in seeing the traditional factories should plan on visiting San Daniele during the last weekend in June, when Aria di Festa San Daniele takes place. This international event recreates a medieval village ham festival. At that time, many of the factories are open for tours.

Prosciutto di San Daniele is only one of many unique products produced in the region. Montasio, one of the lesser-known cheeses from Italy, is spectacular and, luckily for us, it's becoming more widely available in the United States. The area is also well known for its wonderful wine; its whites are considered some of the best wines in Europe. But we'll have to delve into the rest of the treasures of Friuli-Venezia Giulia in future issues of CHEESE CONNOISSEUR. **CC**

Little Breads...



© Pareve



100% Whole Grain!



100% Whole Grain

Quality Bakers Since 1913

RUBSCHLAGER®
BAKING CORPORATION

- ✓ Cocktail Breads
- ✓ Rye-Ola® Breads
- ✓ Square Breads
- ✓ Sandwich Breads
- ✓ Toasted Mini Chips

www.RubschlagersBaking.com
773-826-1245