

PROSCIUTTO with a Captital P

By Lucy Gordan



The Towers of Parma

Roma, October 3, 2006

The term "*prosciutto*" explains in one word the production process of this world-famous type of Italian cured ham. It derives from the Latin *perexuctus* which translates "deprived of all liquid." Cato the Censor (234-149 B.C.) wrote the first document about conserving the meat of pork thighs, by first salting and then drying them before rubbing them with olive oil and then letting them age. He mentions that *pernae* (highly appreciated ham) and *petasones* (shoulders of ham) were produced in the Emilian plain as provisions for the army as well as for banquets in Rome. We also know that, after his victory over the Romans at Trebbia in 217 BC, Hannibal entered Parma and confiscated from the inhabitants as war booty jars containing salted

pork. A century later in his *De re rustica* the historian Varro (116-27 B.C.) and the geographer Strabo (64/63 B.C.-24 A.D.) confirm that the indigenous Gauls from around where Parma is today were experts in pork preservation.

The "secrets" of *prosciutto* have always been its genuine ingredients: only ham and salt, the ability of the salters, the well-ventilated environment where it is cured at c. 3,000 feet above sea level, and its slow and carefully-monitored curing. There are four main types of *prosciutti*: *Prosciutto di Carpegna*, *Prosciutto di Parma*, *Prosciutto di San Daniele*, and *Tuscan Prosciutto Crudo*, although it is produced in eleven regions of northern and central Italy. All four types are cured in the same way: Pork thighs are selected and suspended in well-ventilated or refrigerated rooms for 24 to 36 hours. The fat and hide is then trimmed, and then the salt curing process, the trickiest part of production, begins. In fact, the salters are the highest-paid workers of the production process.

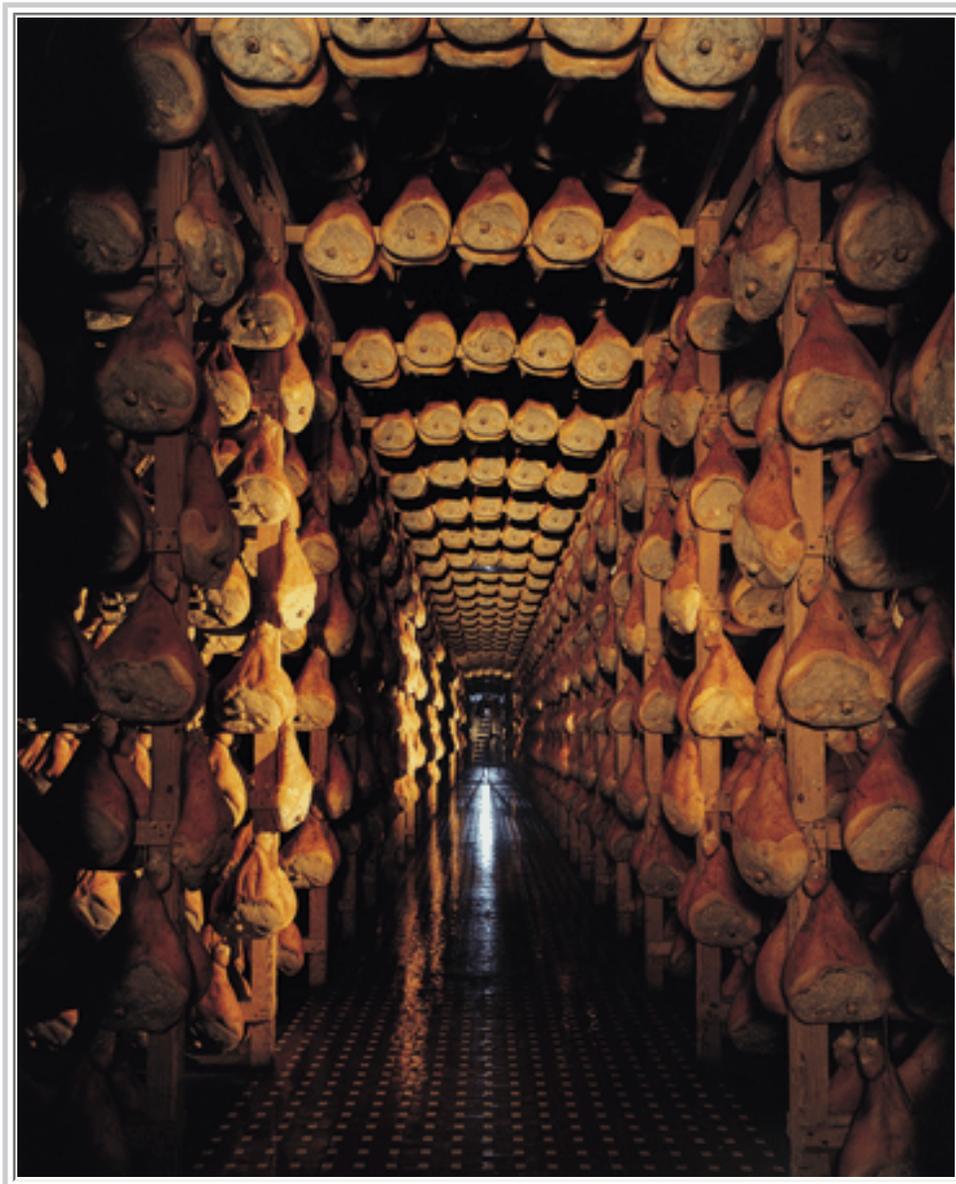


The salters massage and apply salt, only natural sea salt, to the meat once a week for a month. The hams are then washed, brushed and dried either in the sunlight, or more often indoors, where temperatures never exceed 59 degrees F. When dry, they are inspected for flaws (bruises, broken bones, lack of compactness, paleness, sweatiness) and coated with a mixture of flour, lard, water, and pepper. The next and final step is the ageing process. From the birth of the pig to the sale of the cured ham is usually a time-span of three years.

The two most special types of *prosciutti* come from San Daniele in Friuli/Venezia Giulia, not far from Udine, and from Parma. Parma is also the birthplace of Parmesan cheese, the typographer Bodoni, the composer Giuseppe Verdi, and the conductor Arturo Toscanini and, since 2003, appropriately the

headquarters of The European Food Security Authority. Already in the Middle Ages Parma and its environs, today known as "food valley," were a byword for fine food and good living.

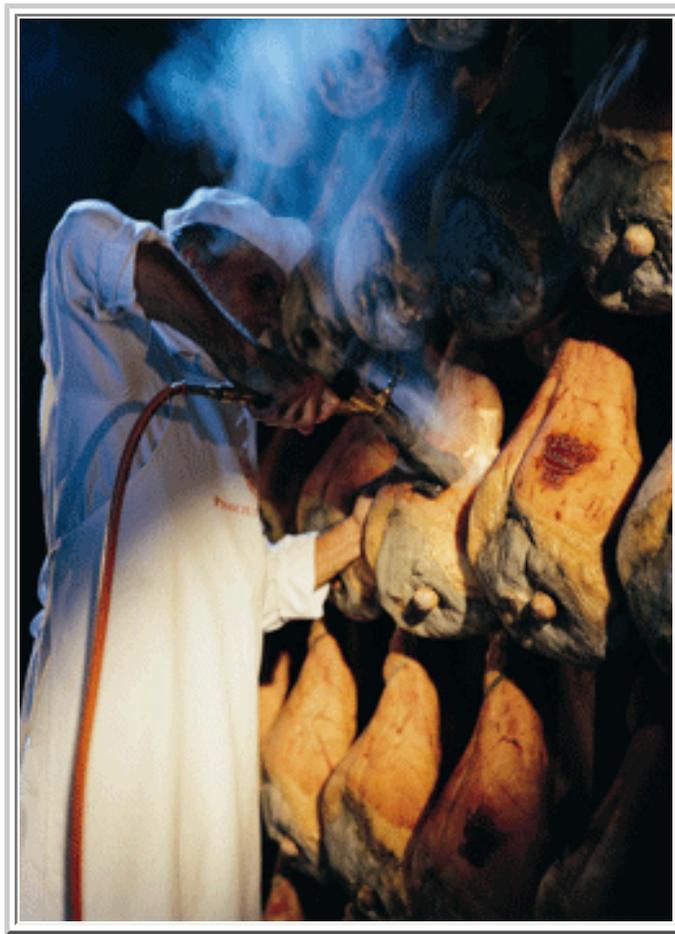
Together with several colleagues from Italy's Foreign Press Association, I recently attended the 9th "*Festival of Prosciutti di Parma*," held annually during the first two weekends of September. Upon our arrival in Parma we visited the magnificent Romanesque baptistry and cathedral, majestically frescoed by Correggio (1489-1534), and in 2006 celebrating its 900th anniversary. We were accompanied by the very informative licensed tour guide Elisabetta Rastelli (bettirastelli@interfree.it) who arranged a special stop in the crypt's often-closed Rusconi Chapel, particularly interesting for its very early (c. 1380) frescoes of clerics and apostles wearing eyeglasses. The cathedral's anniversary is also being celebrated, until January 14, 2007, with an exhibition (in Parma's *Palazzo della Pilotta*) titled "*Vivere il Medioevo: Parma al tempo della Cattedrale*" or "Living the Middle Ages: Parma at the birth of its Cathedral"). After a brief stop at our splendidly-comfortable hotel, Sofitel Grand Hotel de la Ville (Largo Piero Calamandrei 11, tel. 011-39-0521-0304), once part of Barilla's pasta factory, we drove 20 kms. by shuttle bus to Langhirano, the capital of "food valley," to attend the opening ceremony of the "Festival" and visit its *Prosciutto Museum*.



The *Prosciutto Museum* is one of three "Food Museums" in the province of Parma. My article about the first-to-open (November 29, 2003) Museum of Parmesan, "[An Edible Work of Art: Parmesan](#)" was published on www.Epicurean-Traveler.com in April, 2004. The third museum is the Museum of Felino's salami. There are plans to open a fourth museum about the tomato in Collecchio, for the province of Parma is also important for the production of tomato preserves.

The *Prosciutto Museum* is housed in Langhirano's ancient Roman Forum Boarium or meat market behind the once municipal slaughterhouse. The present building dates to 1928. Its displays cover eight different topics:

- 1) **The evolution of agriculture** around Parma from Roman times to the 19th century.
- 2) **The various breeds of pigs** over the centuries (the first representation of a pig in Parma dates to 1462 and is an example of the girdle black breed similar to today's "Sienese black-girdled." Today Parma's prosciutto pigs are a cross-breed of the Yorkshire Large White and Landrace, both first imported in the 19th century).
- 3) **The history of salt and salting procedures.**
- 4) **Tools used for pig butchering** such as knives, daggers, scrapers, cauldrons, cleavers, and hooks.
- 5) A well-explained display of all of **Parma's many cured pork products**: *cicciolata* and *ciccioli* (small and large cracklings); *coppa* (neck); *culatello* (a particular cut of ham off the bone); *pancetta* (bacon), *prete e vescovo* ("priest and bishop" or types of shaped cured pork ready for cooking), and many types of sausage: *mariola*, *Felino*, *gentile*, *crespone*, *cresponetto*, *strolghino*; and *salami* and *lonza*, not to mention *cotechino*, traditionally cooked with lentils on New Year's Eve for prosperity in the coming new year.
- 6) **Gastronomy with** panels of cured pork recipes by several authors from Apicius (author of the first-ever cookbook *De re coquinaria* from the 1st century A.D., to Giuseppe Verdi's "ham in the manner of springtime."
- 7) **The several steps of the curing process**: trimming, salting, rest, washing and grooming, drying, curing and sealing with lard, and "*puntatura*," or quality control of the ham (This is performed by "pricking" the meat in several places with a horse-bone needle to check the smell. There are 20 such inspectors in the Parma region; each producer is visited by an inspector once a month, and each time he inspects about 20% of the produce, discarding an average of only 1 to 3% of production); and finally "bollatura" or "firebranding" the ham with Parma's five-pointed Ducal crown.
- 8) **The history and aims of the Consortium**, as well as information on the province's many other food products: Parmesan cheese, of course, but also the lesser known beets, wheat, barley, corn, maize, onions, tomatoes, and wine grapes.



The next morning we returned to Langhirano for a tour of Leporati, one of the 34 producers who opened his factory during the festival to tourists who want to learn about *prosciutto* production and taste the product on site. Besides "*prosciutto* tours" and tastings, the festival offers many events, such as concerts, plays, art exhibitions, antique car gatherings, and more throughout "food valley." For a complete schedule, consult the festival's very well-designed website: www.finestraperte.it, which is comprehensible, though unfortunately only in Italian.

At the inauguration and at Leporati we learned the answers to many FAQs about *prosciutto*. Within Italy 15% of the *prosciutti* (a total of approximately 2,000,000) come from San Daniele, 39.1% percent come from Parma; and the remaining 45.9 % are lower-cost brands from elsewhere. The differences between *prosciutti di San Daniele* and *prosciutti di Parma* involve salt, age, weight and shape. More salt is used to cure *Prosciutto di San Daniele*. Parma pigs, weighing in at 150 kilos at nine months of age, are 10 kilos lighter and month older than the pigs from San Daniele. They differ in shape: a San Daniele prosciutto, which includes the hoof for a more rustic-looking ham, is guitar shaped, versus Parma's "chicken drumstick" look. They're also aged for different lengths of time: 9-10 months in Parma vs. at least 12 months and sometimes up to two years for San Daniele.

To return to Parma: In 1963, 23 producers joined together to form the Consortium of Parma Ham, nicknamed "*Re dei Prosciutti*" or "King of Hams" to ensure the traditional methods of raising the pigs, their butchery, and their curing for the consumer. Today the Consortium, our host, has 171 members who in 2005 produced 9,839,000 *prosciutti*, each producer producing 6-8,000 *prosciutti* per month. With 15 workers Leporati produced 120,000 *prosciutti* last year, 30% of which was exported.



The 5,386 pig farmers, 139 butchers, and over 3,000 workers who help produce the *prosciutti* annually, come primarily from 12 smallish communities to the south of Parma along the ancient Roman road Via Emilia, bordered by the Rivers Enza to the east and Stirone to the west: Calestano, Collecchio, Corniglio, Felino, Langhirano (the most famous and home to Leporati), Lesignano, Montechiarugolo, Neviano degli Arduini, Palazano, Sala Baganza, Tizzano Val Parma, and Traversetolo,

For a pig to qualify for its thighs to become *prosciutti di Parma*, it must be born of the Large White, Landrace, or Duroc breeds; raised in north or central Italy, preferably in Lombardy, Emilia Romagna, the Veneto or Piedmont, fed only whey, corn, and barley, be a least nine months old and weigh approximately 150 kilos, and they may not have eaten for 15 hours when butchered. The cost of producing these nearly 10,000,000 *prosciutti* is 885,000,000 euros, but with a profit of 1,800,000,000 euros. In 2005 8,068,000 Parma hams were sold in Italy for a profit of 1,300,000,000 euros; of these, 173,000 hams were pre-cut and wrapped into 8.6 million packages. Over 1,770,000 were sold abroad for a profit of 500,000,000 euros; of these 463,000 hams were pre-cut wrapped in 23.1 million packages. Thus 82% of Parma's hams are eaten domestically and only 18% go abroad. Between 2004 and 2005 Italian consumption increased by 19.5% and foreign by 15.7%.

In the export market the biggest consumers are France (the French prefer pre-cut, steak-height not thinly-sliced), followed closely by the United States, where consumption has grown 20% annually over the past seven years for a total of \$50 million dollars out of the \$60 million dollars of Italian ham sold State-side (During our visit to Leporati, Fabrizio Raimondi, the Consortium's public relations manager, told me that he was amazed to find that Dean & De Luca, at 560 Broadway in the Soho district of Manhattan, sold *prosciutti* from nine different Parma producers). Third-place for export goes to Germany and then there is a big gap before the British, Benelux, and Swiss Markets. The biggest Asian market is Japan which imports c. 600 tons annually, and the smallest, almost non-existent European market obviously is *jamón*-producing

Spain.

A consumer-ready *prosciutto di Parma* weighs 9 to 10 kilos and each should provide around 120 portions. Each pig's two thighs or *prosciutti* account for 45% of the pig's worth because nothing is wasted. Fresh *prosciutti* cost the producer 3.5 euros per kilo; the producer sells it to the delicatessen owner for 13 euros per kilo. Around 60% or 6 kilos of each leg are sold to the consumer at 300% more than its cost to the producer. In Italy the price of *prosciutto* ranges between 17 and 20 euros per kilo, double that in the USA, and thrice that in Japan.



During the opening ceremony of this year's festival Stefano Tedeschi, President of the Consortium and one of Italy's most famous soccer referees, announced that 6 more local municipalities had been authorized to produce *prosciutti di Parma*. He then presented the first *prosciutto di Parma* to go to Seoul to Mr. Cho Young-Jai, South Korea's commercial attaché in Rome. "Our next big challenge," said Tedeschi, "will be China, where the red tape is almost finalized, before aiming at Oceania's markets. Actually, the Consortium's biggest challenge is not the marketing, but defending its genuine product from impostors all over the world. So make sure, when you buy *prosciutto*, that the leg is branded with Parma's Ducal crown. Less evident 'signatures' are an indelible tattoo with the breeder's code and birthdate of the pig, a brand telling in which slaughterhouse the pig was butchered, and a metal seal embossed with the month and year when the curing began."

"Nutritionally-speaking," continued Tedeschi, "*prosciutto* is very easy to digest and there are only 280 calories in 100 grams of *prosciutto*--approximately 6 thin slices. This covers our daily protein needs, not to mention 70% of our daily need of vitamins B1 and B6."



A Road in Parma

Tourist Tips:

The best wine to accompany *prosciutto di Parma*, is the dry, sparkling Malvasia produced on the local hills and not be to confused with the sweet Sicilian dessert wine.

"*Vivere il Medioevo: Parma al tempo della Cattedrale*" is open everyday but Monday from 9 AM-7PM; for more information www.cattedrale.parma.it, www.turismo.comune.parma.it or tel: 011-39-0521-218589-889.

Prosciutto Museum: Via Bocchialini 7, Langhirano (Parma), tel: 011-39-0521-351357, e-mail: museoprosciutto@comune.langhirano.pr.it., website: www.museidelcibo.it/prosciutto.asp, open Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays 10 AM- 6PM; otherwise only by appointment for groups of over 15 persons; closed Mondays, January, and February. Entrance fee: 3 euros.

The displays are in both Italian and English and on sale at the entrance for 8 euros there is a splendid recently-published guide in English: *Guide to Langhirano Museum of Parma Ham and Cured Pork Meat Products from Parma*. It was translated from Italian by another superb licensed tour guide, Melanie Schoonhoven, tel. 011-39-0521-200487, mobile: 011-39-347-7773832; e-mail: gabardi@tin.it.

COOKING CLASSES AT ALMA

compiled by Lucy Gordan

Roma, October 16, 2006.

ALMA, is the international university of Italian cuisine, 16 kms. north of Parma in Colorno, founded in 2003 by Gualtiero Marchesi, who is still its rector today. The "university" has a wide selection of new courses specializing in different Italian regional cuisines taught by world-famous chefs. A month ago Marchesi opened "the academic year" with a day-long course called "My Cuisine Today", during which he discussed his favorite ingredients, personal techniques, and the secrets of his success. Marchesi was followed by Walter Eynard for Piemonte, Bruno Barbieri for Emilia Romagna, Nicola Portinari for the Veneto, and Antonella Ricci for Puglia.

Future one-day courses will include Andrea Fusco on October 30 about Lazio; Herbert Hinter on November 8 *La Cucina del Trentino Alto Adige*; Gaetano Alia on November 15 elaborating on the food of Calabria; Luciano Tona, who is on the permanent faculty of ALMA, will present Lombardia on November 22; Gaetano Trovato will elucidate the cuisine Tuscany on November 29; on December 6 Alfonso Caputo will demonstrate the food of Campania; and on December 13 Marco Bistarelli will teach on the food of Marche and Umbria.

After the Christmas holidays the courses will start up again with Pino Cuttaia on January 9 about Sicily, Roberto Petza on January 24 about Sardinia, Niko Romito on January 31 about the Abruzzi and Molise, Paolo Masieri on February 7 about Liguria, and Emanuele Scarello on February 12 about Friuli/Venezia Giulia.

In addition to these one-day courses, ALMA has and will be offering three-day courses. The subjects already covered have been molecular cuisine, salty buffets, chocolate, desserts in general, and chocolate cakes.

Future courses include Fabrizio Sangiorgi on December 12 on the new technologies of vacuum-packaging and again on January 22 on new ways to use the micro-wave; Fabio Bertoni on January 15-16 on baking home-made bread for the family, and from January 17-19 on making bread and cakes for restaurant use.

All courses must be booked in advanced. For their various prices contact the segretaria of ALMA (Piazza Garibaldi 26, 43052 Colorno (Parma), tel. 011-39-0521-525211, e-mail: infoalma@scuolacucina.it, website: www.alma.scuolacucina.it).

SCOOP: Another initiative of the unboundlessly energetic Marchesi is a three-day round table called ALMA VIVA by invitation next month from November 11-13 at Colorno. It will include tastings of local products, a contest between young Italian chefs now working all over the world, cooking demonstrations, seminars on the correct use of olive oil in pastry-making and the presentation of Marchesi's new book, called "Il Codice Marchesi".