

Country Cured Ham Cooking Practices

By
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Country cured ham has been part of the food-chain for centuries. Through the many years, various methods of preserving meat have been practiced, the common ways are drying, smoking, salting and today's freezing.

A simple process of dehydration, in which osmosis withdraws water from the tissue, accomplishes the preservation of meat by the use of salt and sugar.

Cooking a country cured ham is not difficult. However, preparing your home-cured ham for cooking involves a few more steps than cooking a commercial water-added ham. For many folks home-cured hams are far too salty to be cooked directly after curing and aging.

I would suggest that you wash and brush the ham in warm water if needed. To remove some of the mold you may want to use some vinegar (1 cup per gallon of water.) Generally, this only needs to be done if the hams remold before cooking.

I like to freshen the ham before cooking to remove some of the salt. If the ham has been aged, soak in clean lukewarm water for 8 to 24 hours to improve the quality and appearance. A non-aged ham can simply be rinsed under warm running water.

Soaking the ham will dissolve a large amount of the salt that is concentrated on the surface of the ham. This soaking will make it more receptive to smoke. After soaking, scrub with a stiff-bristled brush and allow the ham to dry for about three to four hours before smoking, this process will enhance smoke penetration and reduce the salty taste in the meat.

Cooking the whole ham is accomplished in many different ways.

Method #1 Simmer (Boil)

Method #1 is to place ham in a large kettle or 5-gallon lard can. Add water to cover the ham and bring to a boil with the lid on. Reduce the heat and simmer until the meat thermometer in ham reads 160 degrees F (about 20 to 25 minutes per pound.) Drain the ham, let cool and slice.

Since the country cured ham has already lost about 25% of its moisture in the curing and aging process, high moisture cooking is necessary. The tip of the thermometer should not touch the bone, but should be near the center of the ham.

Method #2 Bake

To bake, place ham in a large roasting pan, fat side up. Add two inches of water. Bake covered in 275 to 300 degrees F oven until meat thermometer reads 155 to 160 degrees F. I like to take the ham from the pan and place it on a rack over a large, shallow pan. This shallow pan will catch the drippings while I cut and remove the skin, fat and bones. After it cools for awhile, then slice to serve. To add a little different flavor, you may substitute 7-UP instead of water.

Method #3 Roast

Place ham in a deep roaster, skin side up. Add water to within 2 inches of the top of the pan and add a cup of sorghum, honey, or brown sugar. Simmer for 20 minutes per pound or until internal temperature reaches 155 to 160 degrees F. Allow ham to slowly cool in liquid. Remove ham roaster, remove skin and excess fat. Return the ham to the roaster without liquid and apply glaze to fat-side of ham. Place under broiler or hot oven until glaze is golden brown. Watch carefully to avoid burning glaze.

Method #4 Frying

Cut ham into ¼ to 3/8" thick slices and put in heavy skillet containing a little water (about one ounce.) Do not cover skillet. Fry slowly and turn slices frequently. Do not fry too fast or over-fry. Grease should not spatter. Cook until both sides of the slice are light brown. Over-cooking will make the meat tough.

Method #5 Cooking Bag

Place ham in a cooking bag or wrap in aluminum foil. Place a meat-thermometer into ham. Cook slowly at a low heat (200 to 225 degrees) in roasting pan containing 2 inches of water. Ham will be done when the internal temperature reaches 155 degrees F. Remove the skin, trim dark area, remove bones, cool and slice.