

COOPERATIVE
EXTENSION
SERVICE

UK
UNIVERSITY OF
KENTUCKY
College of Agriculture,
Food and Environment
extension.ca.uky.edu

EXTENDING KNOWLEDGE *Changing Lives*



Contact:

Animal and Food Sciences
900 W. P. Garrigus Building
Lexington, Kentucky 40546
(859) 257-2686

<http://afs.ca.uky.edu/>



**When you
support
Extension,
residents
develop
heritage skills
to create safe
food for their
families.**



2015 Kentucky State Fair 4-H Country Ham entries.

Family Traditions Begin with Extension Heritage Skill Programs to Cure Hams

County Extension personnel provided professional expertise, hands-on workshops, and equipment required for the production of country hams to over 1,000 youth and adults in seventy-one counties during 2015.



Extension has erected thirty-two ham houses to serve over 1,000 clients annually in 71 counties.

Country ham production is growing in popularity as people discover similarities to its European rival, prosciutto (Perry, 2008). In the “ham belt” (Kentucky, North Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia), approximately 5% of hams are cured as country hams for family use. Learning to cure a country ham is a heritage skill youth and adults are eager to gain.

Kentucky 4-H introduced the Country Ham Project in 2000 at the Kentucky State Fair in response to requests from ham producers to insure people would understand the “how and why of producing country hams” (Mikel, 2000). The 4-H participation has quickly grown from 38 contestants in 2000 to 762 entries at the 2015 Kentucky State Fair. Youth conduct research on country hams, compose an essay and present a speech as part of their competition.

Country ham is the dry cured hind leg of a pig that harks back to the way food was preserved before mechanical refrigeration. Country ham differs from wet cured or “city ham” in flavor and texture. Historically, pigs are harvested in the cold weather months. Hams are removed and cooled before salt, sugar and spices are rubbed into the ham to start the curing process. Extension staff and trained volunteers teach the bag and box method of curing. After curing, hams can be cold smoked ($\leq 105^{\circ}\text{F}$) utilizing hard woods; this step is a personal preference.

To be a country ham, at least 18% of the green (uncured) weight must be lost and contain 4% or more salt, according to USDA. Very few bacteria can grow without moisture in the high salt concentration. Aging the ham through the summer (nine to 12 months or longer) will intensify the flavor and aroma.

In **Breathitt County**, adult participation in the country ham workshops grew from seven adults in 2014 to 75 in 2015. Because of the growing interest in the country ham project, thirty-two Extension offices have erected ham



Green or uncured hams are rubbed with salt, sugar and other spices for dry curing.



*County hams curing in the **Muhlenberg County** ham house.*

houses for use by clients to cure and age the meat in a secured and appropriate space.

Extension Country Ham Programs provide knowledge in animal and food science, microbiology, food preservation and food safety. The workshops provide research-based publications and hands-on training. The hams prepared in the workshops are for personal use since home cured hams cannot be legally sold to the public.