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Maple Cure-All: Hams are just the start

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SOUTH BARRE — Gas stations are not normally known for their fine aromas, but the Shell station at the bottom of the hill where Vermont 63 and 14 meet is an exception.

If the wind is blowing the right way, instead of the fumes that usually fill your nose as you pump gas, you can catch the salty-sweet scent of the Vermont Smoke and Cure smokehouse, which is quietly tucked into the back of the station building.

The cramped front offices of the building — originally a creamery — leave as much room as possible for the production rooms where Vermont Smoke and Cure has been smoking hams, bacon, turkey, summer sausage and pepperoni, as well as making a variety of fresh pork sausages since 2001.

Amidst tantalizing whiffs of maple-cured, maple-smoked ham and bacon that has been praised by The New York Times Magazine as worthy of nomination for “the finest bacon on the planet,” Vermont Smoke and Cure general manager Chris Bailey recently explained that a local family had run a smokehouse out of that same building and another nearby since the early 1960s.

After they quit the business, a subsequent owner put it up for sale about the same time that Vermont farmer and entrepreneur Tod Murphy was trying to launch his Farmers Diner concept, a network of affordable, diner-style restaurants serving, as he puts it, “food from here.”

Eggs and dairy were no problem, nor were potatoes for hash browns and fries, or beef for burgers, but “to have a diner, you have to have bacon, ham and sausage,” Bailey explained — and Murphy was having a hard time identifying a supply of Vermont-grown and Vermont-processed cured and fresh pork products.

So he bought the smokehouse and started operating it before he even opened his first restaurant in Barre in 2002. (The original Barre location has since been replaced by a diner in Quechee.)

As Bailey opened the huge door into the production facility, the first aromas that hit were the secret-recipe brine from the day’s batch of hams, which were taking a slow tumble in a long steel barrel to break down their proteins. The room smelled sweet with a spicy edge, reminiscent of gingerbread with a little sugar shack thrown in.

The hams are made completely from scratch, Bailey explained, starting with hand-trimmed fresh pork injected with a brine made with pure Grade B maple syrup from Northfield and finished with a roughly six-hour smoke over corncobs and maple wood. “It’s a pretty mild smoke,” Bailey said. “We could smoke it for three days, but then you’d lose the maple flavor — and that’s Vermont.”

The result is exceptionally moist, well-textured meat carrying a nice amount of fat and a beautifully balanced porky, mapley flavor. Forget all you know about rubbery boiled ham tasting mostly of salt and bloated with water. Unlike boiled hams, Bailey explained, “Our finished product weighs less than when it started.”

In the next room, it was time to take yesterday’s hams from the smoker. A waft of smoky, moist sweetness hit the air as one of the plant’s six production workers pulled out a rack hung with dark red hunks of ham, bacon and pork shoulder striated with creamy streaks of fat. The rack headed for a cooling room as one worker started slicing an earlier batch of bacon for retail sale while another vacuum-sealed full slabs for a Boston restaurant customer.

Bailey explained that the smokehouse produces two lines of branded products in addition to custom-processing meat for about 500 Vermont farms a year in quantities as small as one pig and as large as hundreds of turkeys.

It was as important to Murphy's original vision, Bailey continued, that small farms have access to a federally inspected smokehouse where they could get their meat cured and smoked even if it wasn't the product he would be selling at his diners. "He was trying to create a profitable, regional smokehouse business that does custom-smoking and small-scale commercial smoking," Bailey said.

The Farmers Diner line is used in the diner and sold through co-ops and independent natural food markets in Vermont and New Hampshire. It averages 50 percent Vermont pork, and the pigs must be raised free of antibiotics, fed no animal byproducts, and have access to open pasture in season.

The Vermont Smoke and Cure line is made largely with a high-quality, commodity pork from Quebec because, Bailey said, he simply cannot find enough Vermont-raised pork to buy. The products have been available at Shaw's for a year and will launch in Hannaford next month. They also can be bought in the New York City area at Zabar's, Balducci's and the small Food Emporium chain.

Bailey would like nothing better than to use all Vermont pork but, he says, despite the fact that "we're paying over double the commodity price," there just doesn't seem to be much interest among farmers in building up the state's pork production. "They're a natural for dairy farmers that have exited," he says. "Their facilities can be renovated; they've got grain bins already."

He wonders if it's because pigs are seen as muddy and dirty, or if it's the lack of commercial pig farming heritage in Vermont where farmers have more traditionally raised just one or two for personal use. "Maybe it's that there's more grass than grain in Vermont," he mused, noting that pigs don't eat grass like more common Vermont livestock such as cows, sheep and goats.

There's no shortage of appreciation for cured pork products in Vermont, however. Vermont Smoke and Cure floor supervisor Brenda Blair of Plainfield grew up on a local farm, she explained as she prepared the next batch of hams for the smoker, trimming them expertly with a huge knife. "I always love my ham and bacon because I was brought up on a farm," she said. Her Easter dinner ham, she added, will probably be topped with a can of crushed pineapple and stuck with cloves.

After Blair trimmed the brined pork, Wayne Chrisman of Barre wrapped each one and twirled it tightly in a net bag before hanging it on the smoking rack. Personally, he said, he prefers his ham straight up: "Right out of the smokehouse is best," he said with a grin.

RECIPES: Easter Ham With Two Kinds of Biscuits

General instructions for Maple-Mustard Glazed Baked Ham using a fully cooked ham:

Select ham: Look for a fully cooked ham, bone-in or boneless, with the natural shape of the leg as opposed to the re-formed oval shape of boiled deli hams, which should not be baked. Check the label and buy either "ham with natural juices" or (less expensive by weight but you're getting more water and less pork) "ham — water added." Do not bake anything labeled "ham and water product." A ham with some external fat will also yield a better baked result. For a boneless ham, allow one pound for 4 servings. For a bone-in ham, allow 1 pound for 2–3 servings.

Bake ham: Preheat oven to 325 degrees. Cut away any skin and trim fat to a thickness of one-quarter to one-half inch. Place ham, fat side up, in a shallow roasting pan. If you plan to glaze ham, line the pan with foil, since the sugar in the glaze can burn. As a rough guide, roast a fully cooked ham for about 10 minutes per pound. A whole ham should cook in 2 and one-half to 3 hours, a half ham in 1 and one-half to 2 hours. Check the temperature after the minimum time with an instant read thermometer. It should read 130–140 degrees (since the ham is fully cooked, you only have to heat it through). If the ham is not yet at the desired temperature, continue to bake and check it every 15–20 minutes. You can serve ham after a 20–30 minute rest or proceed to glaze it.

Glaze ham: When ham is warmed through, raise oven temperature to 425 degrees. Remove ham from oven and score surface of fat to make a crisscross grid if desired. For a simple glaze for half a ham, whisk together one-quarter cup whole-grain mustard, one-quarter cup packed light brown sugar, and one-quarter pure maple syrup, preferably Grade B. Spread generously over surface of ham. Bake for about 20 minutes, basting with pan juices a few times. Brush on more glaze if you wish. Remove ham from oven, cover loosely with foil, and let it rest for 20 minutes before carving.

-- Method adapted from "The Complete Meat Cookbook" by Bruce Aidells and Denis Kelly, Houghton Mifflin, 1998; glaze recipe by Melissa Pasanen.

Sweet Potato Biscuits with Basic Biscuit Variation

2 cups all-purpose flour
1 tablespoon baking powder
1 teaspoon salt
2 tablespoons (packed) light brown sugar
Three-quarters stick (6 tablespoons) cold unsalted butter, cut into 12 pieces
2 (15-ounce) cans sweet potatoes in syrup, drained and mashed (about 2 cups)

Preheat oven to 425 degrees with a rack in the center position. Get out a sharp 2 or 2-and-one-half-inch-diameter biscuit cutter and line a baking sheet with parchment or a silicone mat. Whisk flour, baking powder and salt together in a bowl. Add brown sugar and stir to incorporate it, making sure there are no lumps. Drop in butter and, using your fingers, toss to coat it with flour. Quickly, working with your fingertips or a pastry blender, cut and rub butter into dry ingredients until mixture is pebbly. You'll have pea-size pieces, pieces the size of oatmeal flakes, and pieces the size of everything in between — and that's just right. Add sweet potatoes to the bowl, grab a fork, and toss and gently turn the ingredients until you've got a soft, nice dough. Now reach into the bowl with your hands and give the dough a quick, gentle kneading — 3 or 4 turns should be just enough to bring everything together.

Lightly dust a work surface with flour and turn out the dough. Dust the top of the flour very lightly with flour and pat the dough out with your hands or roll it with a pin until it is about one-half inch high. Don't worry if the dough isn't completely even — a quick, light touch is more important than accuracy. Use a biscuit cutter to cut out as many biscuits as you can. Try to cut biscuits close to one another so you get the most you can out of this first round. By hand or with a small spatula, transfer biscuits to prepared baking sheet. Gather together scraps, working them as little as possible, pat out to one-half-inch thickness and cut as many additional biscuits as you can; transfer these to the sheet. Bake biscuits for 14–18 minutes, or until they are puffed and golden brown. Transfer them to a cooling rack — cooled a bit, they're more sweet potatoey. Give them 10–15 minutes before popping them into a basket and serving. Makes about 18 biscuits.

Basic Biscuit Variation: Follow above method and ingredients with the following changes: Reduce salt to one-half teaspoon, replace brown sugar with 2 teaspoons white granulated sugar, and replace mashed sweet potatoes with three-quarters cup milk, preferably whole. Makes about 12 biscuits. These are best served straight from the oven.

— Adapted from "Baking: From My Home to Yours" by Dorie Greenspan, Houghton Mifflin, 2006.

Free Press testing note: These sweet potato biscuits are good by themselves, but they are exceptional served with ham. A basket combining the basic creamy-white biscuits and the pale orange sweet potato biscuits would be pretty and delicious for an Easter buffet table. We like to give both types of biscuits a little shine on top by brushing them with milk right before baking.