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THOMAS P. COOPER, Dean and Director.

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CUTTING AND CURING PORK

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Cutting and Curing Pork

By GRADY SELLARDS

Pork is an important item of the farm food supply. It follows that a thoro knowledge of how to cut and cure the home pork supply is of great importance.

One of the essentials in preparing first-class pork is the selection of hogs of the proper size that are well finished. The best quality of pork is secured from hogs of medium size, weighing from 175 to 200 pounds. This size hog is recommended also because it can be produced more cheaply than a heavier hog.

Fig. 1. Hogs of the proper size for home pork. Average weight 197 pounds.

Altho proper cutting and curing are the processes of greatest importance in the preparation of good cured pork products, there are other details that merit consideration; these are the management of the animal previous to slaughtering, bleeding the animal, and cooling out the carcass before making the cuts.

Twelve to twenty-four hours previous to slaughtering, all feed should be withheld and the hogs allowed access to an abundant supply of drinking water. Animals should be killed by sticking alive, since this method promotes the most thoro bleeding. Hogs do not bleed out properly when they have been stunned or shot before the sticking is done. In sticking alive, the heart action continues until it pumps out practically all the blood in the animal's body. After the carcass has been cleaned and the viscera removed the next step is to cool out the carcass thoroly before it is cut up.

During the past five years the writer has given on Kentucky farms many demonstrations of blocking out and trimming the pork carcass. In view of the fact that few farmers are equipped as well as butchers for cutting meat, effort was made

Fig. 2. A pork cutting demonstration on a Crittenden County farm.

to use simple equiment in these demonstrations. In many cases a double-bit axe, two sharp knives and an oil stone constituted the equipment. It is preferable to have a saw but not absolutely necessary.

The initial step in cutting up the pig is to remove the head, after which the carcass should be placed on a platform strong enough to support the weight of a man in addition to the carcass. Steady the carcass by placing one of your feet on each side of it. Then split the backbone down the center.

"Why split the backbone down the center?" inquired one of our audience at a demonstration. "That ruins the backbone," said he.

"By making the cut in this way, we make pork chops, which are superior in every way to backbone," was the answer.

This is true because pork chops have more high quality meat on them and can be cooked either by frying or boiling, while backbone must be prepared by boiling only. The method generally employed in cutting farm pork prescribes that the ribs be cut loose on both sides where they join the backbone, the loin strip usually being used for sausage. When the backbone is split, the loin strip is left on for chops and the rib is cut in two three or four inches below where it joins the backbone. It was also explained that the hog carcass should be split just as soon as the carcass is cleaned, since this will aid the rapid cooling of the carcass.

"If I use your method instead of the usual method, there is more meat that must be used while fresh," rejoined one of our listeners.

"Oh, no," it was answered, "the loin can be used for sausage just as it always has been, while the remainder of the cut can be used for chops. Some farmers salt down the loin cut for 8 or 10 days, smoke it and wrap it just as they do hams. As such, the loin has proved highly satisfactory.

The next step in our demonstration was to count back from 3 to 5 ribs from the head end of the carcass and remove the shoulder. At this point progress was again halted by the question,

"How do you keep shoulder meat from getting strong when it begins to age?"

"That's easy," was the reply, "just take care not to cure so much of it in one piece."

Then we removed the upper third of the shoulder and neatly trimmed the lower two-thirds. It was then explained that, if the uper third was taken off, the picnic could be cured more uniformly, because the cure would penetrate the piece around the shoulder blade more uniformly.

"But what can be done with the part of the shoulder you cut off?"

"That can be cured and used for seasoning, used as fresh pork roasts, or made into sausage, preferably the latter, because most country sausage has too little lean in it anyway," was the answer.

The fat part of the shoulder butt—clear plate—should be rendered into lard.

Our next cut was the ham, which was cut off squarely about three fingers' width in front of the aitch bone—called "line" bone by many. It was then trimmed. This time there came more questions from our audience.

"Why not make the ham longer?" was one question.

"We take the long end off because it is the part that gets strong and is wasted."

We have talked with many country ham dealers in the cities and, in every case, they have said that they would pay more for well trimmed hams, and preferred that the long point be removed. A standard criticism among consumers of country ham is: "The long point is waste." This is due to the fact that the cure is not uniform around the bones of a ham with the long point.

"How do you hang your hams after they have been cured, and isn't it a fact that they should be hung hock down, which is the natural position of the piece on the hog?"

"If there is an advantage in hanging the ham hock down, it is that the drainage concentrates on the hock bone, a part of

little value. As a matter of fact, several successful ham producers hang them hock up and get just as good results as those who use the opposite method,'' was the reply.

Our pork cutting demonstration was completed after we had split the side of the carcass about one-fourth of the distance

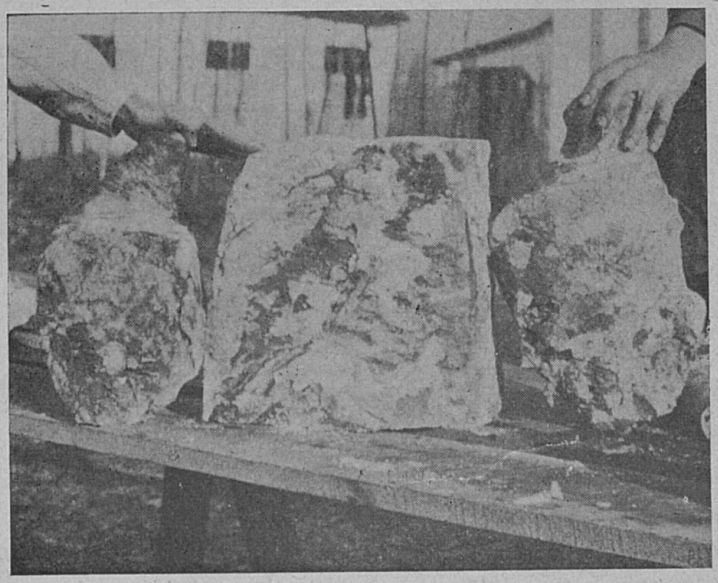

Fig. 3. Shoulder, bacon, ham, loin and fat back improperly trimmed.

Fig. 4. Shoulder, bacon and ham properly trimmed.

from the top. The bacon strip of this 225 pound carcass was about 10 inches wide after it was trimmed. The chop and loin cut was now removed from the fat back which was to be rendered into lard. Fat back makes good lard, but it makes a poor cured product.

At this time we paused to examine some big sides of meat that remained from the previous season. These had been trimmed in the old way and were at least 15 inches wide. They had been cured with salt alone and left unsmoked. Consequently, they presented a hard surface, and a characteristically strong odor. During the progress of our examination, a man who had lived for about three score years, remarked, "I used to be able to eat that kind of meat, but now my stomach won't let me. Anyway," said he, "The sweet cured smoked meat has a better flavor and I don't see why anybody wouldn't like it better."

The curing of meat was then considered. The principal ingredients to use in meat curing are salt and sugar, followed by a period of smoking with green hickory or other hardwood. Salt preserves meat by forcing out moisture and simultaneously hardening the tissue. Sugar counteracts, to some extent, this tissue hardening effect of the salt, sweetens and improves the flavor of the meat. So, in salt and sugar we have the ideal cure.

"How about borax and saltpeter?" asked one of our listeners.

"Saltpeter preserves the rich red color of meats but, if used at all, should be used only sparingly. Borax is of little benefit, if any. Both saltpeter and borax harden meat tissue—more so than salt," was the answer.

To summarize the steps in curing pork. It should not be put into cure until free of all animal heat.

After being trimmed, it should first be rubbed with salt and allowed to lie for about 48 hours before the salting is finished.

As it is salted, the meat may be placed in a barrel or oak box with sufficient holes in the bottom for drainage; or it may be left on a table. If allowed to remain on the table, there will be some risk of insect attack.

Allow the salt to continue its action for 2 curing days for each pound, in case of small hams and shoulders, and 1½ curing days to the pound for bacon. Leave no piece in salt more than 28 days.

The temperature of the ideal curing day is 36 degrees Fahrenheit. If the temperature drops below freezing, the meat is taking no salt at all; hence such days should not be counted in determining the salt period.

After the meat has been in salt for the specified time, remove and wash it in lukewarm water, after which hang it and allow it to drain.

Smoke with green hickory or other hardwood for from 2½ to 6 days. A good index of meat that is sufficiently smoked is a characteristic amber color.

Next in order is the sweet ingredient of the curing mixture. Hot sorghum molasses can well be used to furnish this part of the cure. It should be applied with a small brush.

The meat should then be wrapped with two layers of heavy paper, tied with a strong cord and put into substantial cloth bags. This finishes the cure.

Then follows the process of ageing, which accounts for the vast difference in the flavor of country and packer cured hams. After the hams have been wrapped as specified, they should be hung in a dark, dry smokehouse.

A large percentage of farmers who follow a prescribed plan of meat curing, stop when they get to the suggestion on wrapping. The wrapping is just as important as any other step in the method. Properly wrapped hams seldom are attacked by skippers or other insects. In addition, the wrapping assists in keeping the meat soft and juicy.