

epicure

NOVEMBER 22, 2016



# good food

THE AGE

## Ham it up

We have the best Christmas hams all wrapped up. Page 8

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**cover story****richard cornish**

# In search of the perfect ham

Glazed and confused? We taste-test 22 hams.

It's the annual battle of the hams. Twenty-plus brined and smoked legs from across the nation were assembled at the historic Lincoln Hotel in Melbourne's Carlton. Once the drinking hole of Bob Hawke and his mates from nearby Trades Hall, it was filled with the aroma of smoke, spice and cured pork. Around the dry bars were gathered 18 of Australia's top chefs, sommeliers, food judges, writers and editors, whose sole job was to sniff, poke, chew and assess the hams.

They were tasting hams blind, knowing nothing about each entry other than what they could garner using their senses. They scored the hams on aesthetics, scoring down for simple faults such as torn skin, uneven trimming, bristles left in the skin and blotches from where one ham rested against another during smoking.

The hams were marked out of 25 for aroma, the judges looking for a pleasing smokiness without it smelling like bushfire. They also judged out of 25 for texture, flavour and "x factor", arriving at a possible total of 100.

The kitchen team at the Lincoln carved the hams from three different muscles. Meat from close to the bone showed the judges that the ham was evenly brined and cooked through. A cut from just under the skin highlighted the quality of the fat, an essential vector for flavour. The third slice was from the muscle equivalent of our inner thigh. Not covered by skin, this area has the deepest concentration of smoke. Smooth and pleasant smokiness is good. Overwhelming or bitter smoke is bad. Importantly, all hams had to be available in Sydney and Melbourne.

Former *MasterChef* contestant and now

food writer Alice Zaslavsky said, "As a food writer, my first question is 'Where is the pig from? Who is the producer?' More and more people are asking about animals ethics. In my opinion, meat tastes better when raised outdoors on pasture." The line-up included 11 hams from certified free-range or pasture-raised pigs, reflecting growing consumer demand for higher ethical standards. Seven of the hams that made the top 10 were from free-range pigs.

Halfway through the tasting, award-winning sommelier Banjo Harris Plane went rogue and opened a bottle of pinot noir, saying, "ham should never be consumed without wine". He suggested a full-bodied white wine with good minerality or a light red such as pinot noir or gamay.

In the end, there were hams that divided the judges, hams the judges loved and hams they loathed. But perhaps the biggest surprise of the tasting was that one of the cheapest hams came in at No. 8. While this year's #hamfest revealed a ham for every taste, there could be only one winner.

**Winner****1 Meatsmith Rare Breed Traditional Leg Ham****Score 79/100**

This year's Golden Hog award for the best ham goes to a beautifully presented ham from Troy Wheeler and his team at Melbourne's Meatsmith. This upmarket butchery, specialising in ethically raised meat, is a co-production between this expertly trained butcher and his business partner, restaurateur Andrew McConnell of Cutler and Co., Supernormal, Cumulus Inc, and Ricky and Pinky fame. Twelve of the 18 judges awarded this their highest score, putting it way ahead of its nearest



competition. The ham is made from free-range Tamworth pigs whose legs are brined for 72 hours with brown sugar, juniper, caraway, bay and cloves, then hot-smoked over beechwood. Food writer Michael Harden said, "Nice truss work," referring to the string encasing the ham. "Looks like a hipster ham." The proof was in the eating, with rich dark smoke aromas that reminded publican Iain Ling of his upbringing in the north of England. Neil Hargreaves from the Australian Food Awards summed it up with: "A great product. Beautiful smoke. Great texture, perfectly juicy and lingering spiced sweetness."

**\$34 a kilogram**  
meatsmith.com.au

**2 Baby Leg Ham****Score 72/100**

Second place went to this small but beautiful golden ham made from a suckling pig by Black Forest Smokehouse for Sydney superstar butcher Anthony Puharich from Vic's Meat. Puharich wanted a quality ham for those "who can't stretch their budgets to buy a free-range or rare breed" ham. Cured to Smokehouse's 100-year-old family brine recipe, whole legs, hoof on, are then hot-smoked for two to three days over beechwood and ironbark. "This is a ham with an amazing honey aroma," judge and

winemaker Neil Prentice said. "It has a very powerful smokiness, complex flavour, really juicy and tender. A truly lovely ham."

**\$16-\$18 a kilogram**  
vicsmeatmarket.com.au

**Best mid-range ham****3 Yarra Valley Smokehouse Free Range Leg Ham on the Bone****Score 70/100**

Just two points separated this large, pleasing-looking ham from its nearest competitor. Made from free-range berkshire pigs in Victoria's Yarra Valley, it scored evenly for its attractive curves, even colour and mild flavour. It was noted for its quite sweet meat, light smoke and perfect level of juiciness. "The texture of this is excellent," said Good Food restaurant reviewer Gemima Cody. "It's like eating velvet."

**\$23.95 a kilogram**  
rawmaterials.com.au

**4 Pyrenees Ranges Free Range Ham By Gamekeepers****Score 69/100**

Another lovely crowd-pleasing ham made from free-range large white pigs, cured without soy or gums then triple-smoked. Restaurateur Edouard Raymond, of Bistro Gitan, said, "A good level of salt with a pleasant smokiness and nice mouthfeel."