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Merry Christmas! Cat head biscuits and country ham

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When I was a little girl, old-fashioned country hams were hard to come by in Michigan, so whenever my folks had the chance to get hold of a one they would. Once in a while we could find them at a little store and if Daddy had the money he would get one, but more often than not we had to wait for family from Kentucky to bring us one, or we would pick one up when we headed “down South ...”

Back when the old house was full of children we didn't usually have a big dinner on Christmas day. Our mother knew it would be useless to try and herd a half dozen busy children to the table long enough to eat, so usually she made something handheld that we could carry around with us as we played with our new toys. A big ham biscuit with a smear of mustard and a cup of cider to wash it all down was just the ticket.

Once grown, the first country ham I ever bought on my own was 99 cents a pound. (Today it is more than \$2.) We brought it home a couple of weeks before Christmas and hung it in our mud room. The day before Christmas Eve I took it down to prepare it for baking. I had never watched my mother unwrap and clean a ham before, so when I took the cloth sack off I was shocked: it was as moldy and green as the one Sam I Am encountered in Dr. Seuss' Green Eggs And Ham.

Disgusted, I returned the ham to the store where I'd bought it. When I explained the mold, the clerk told me that they were supposed to be that way! Unbelieving, I received my refund and promptly bought a regular smoked ham.

On Christmas day when an uncle and aunt came over and shared dinner with us, and I told my uncle what had happened. To my surprise, he agreed with the clerk and told me that the moldier the ham, the better it would taste. Apparently I was not as country as I'd thought. Thankfully, I've learned a few things since then.

More recently, some city folks have taken to calling country ham southern prosciutto, similar to the fancy Italian ham. The primary difference between the two is that real country ham needs to be cooked before eating. The other primary difference is that folks who call it southern prosciutto tend to wear \$500 shoes. Feel free to eat yours without any shoes on at all. Merry Christmas, y'all.

Preparing A Country Ham

Country ham is generally baked, boiled or fried. Back home, we always ate ours fried. At breakfast time, Mama would fry up several extra slices until they were tough as shoe leather — just the way we liked it — and put them on a little plate on the back of the stove for us to snack on all day sort of like ham jerky.

If you are making country ham for your Christmas dinner, one of the first things you need to know is that most health care professionals will tell you that it — and Cat Head biscuits, for that matter — are not good very for you. But it is Christmas, after all, so I suggest an afternoon of chopping wood to equal it all out.

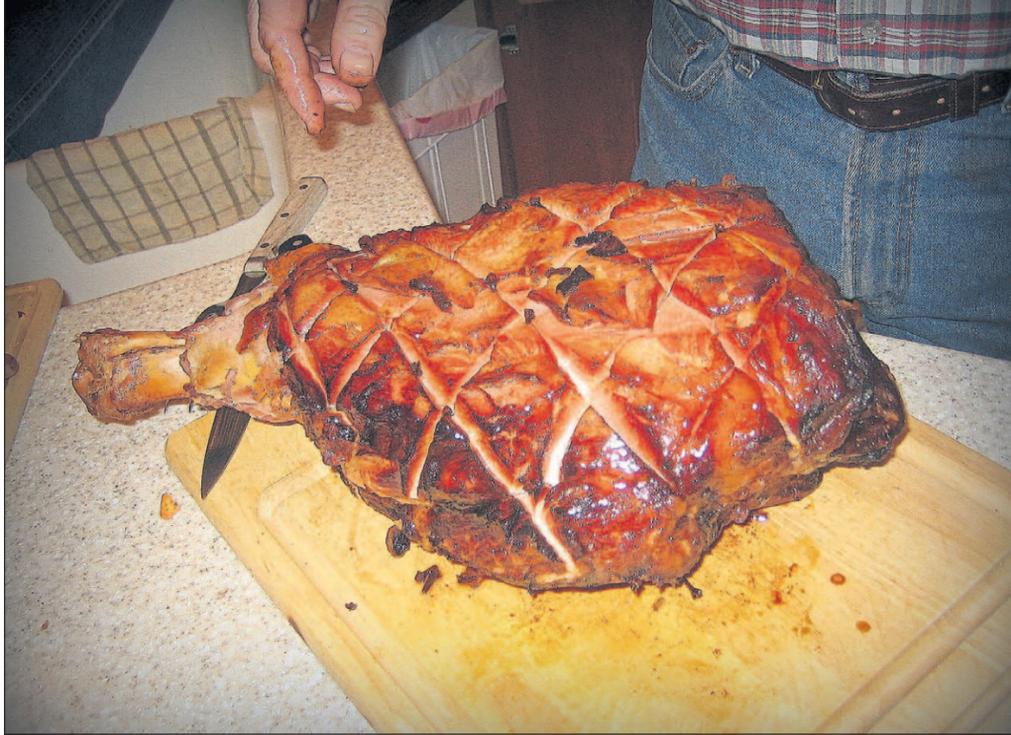
Secondly, it's important to begin preparing the ham two or even three days in advance, depending on how salty you want the final product to be. If it has been properly aged, your country ham should have some mold on it. As Chef Alton Brown says, “If you hung in a sack for 6 months you'd have mold, too.”

The easiest way to remove the mold is to wash the ham in warm water with a little vinegar,



Laura Hunt Angel photo

Stacked high with country ham, old fashioned Cat Head biscuits are a mouthwatering treat for breakfast, lunch or dinner.



John Goetzinger photo via Flickr

A perfectly baked country ham, ready for the Christmas table.

using a clean, stiff scrub brush to remove any stubborn spots. Then rinse it very thoroughly.

Our father had a tendency toward hyponatremia, or low blood sodium, so our mother did not soak our hams at all, she simply washed off any mold and fried it. However, most of us cannot tolerate that much sodium so it is wise to soak your country ham in plain cold water. Smithfield recommends soaking for anywhere from 24-36 hours, depending on how much salt you want to remove, and changing the water about every 4 hours. (I only change the water 3 or 4 times during soaking.) Since you ought to keep the ham cool during soaking, placing the ham in a large cooler simplifies the process quite a bit.

After soaking, the ham is ready prepare as you wish. To boil it, simply place it in a large enough pot, cover with water and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to simmer and cook for about 25 minutes per pound, adding water as needed.

A basic baking method is to wrap the ham completely in foil and place it in a roaster with a quart or so of water (you can also use apple cider or cola). Bake it at 300 degrees for about 20 minutes per pound, checking it from time to time and add more water as necessary. Loveless Cafe recommends removing the rind (outer skin)



A Cat Head biscuit as compared to an actual cat head.

and scoring the fat prior to baking. After it is scored you can dot the ham with whole cloves if you like, but be sure to remove the cloves before serving it to children or others who may not notice them. For a real treat, slice up the skin and deep fry it for homemade pork rinds.

If you choose to bake your ham with cider, save the leftover liquid and boil it down until syrupy to serve as a sauce with the biscuits. Boiled cider, an old colonial condiment, usually does not contain meat juices, but boiling it with the ham juices in it is exceptionally rich and delicious.

The Recipes

Glazing a ham creates the final sparkling touch to a special

meal, and it looks much more difficult than it is. If you boiled your ham, remove it from the pot, saving the liquid for flavoring beans or greens. Place it on a baking sheet and glaze as directed. For baked ham, remove from foil (again saving the liquid) and place it on the baking sheet.

Brown Sugar, Honey and Mustard Glaze

My all time favorite glaze and far better than any prepackaged mix you can buy. This recipe will provide enough glaze for a 15 lb ham.

1 ¼ cups honey
⅓ cup brown sugar
⅓ cup Dijon or grainy mustard
½ teaspoon ground cloves

Heat oven to 425 degrees F. Combine all ingredients in a small saucepan and heat until the brown sugar is dissolved. Evenly cover the ham with about a third of the glaze and bake about 15 minutes. Remove the ham from the oven and apply another third of the glaze. Bake 15 minutes more, then repeat the process a final time, baking the ham a little longer if necessary until the ham is a dark as you would like.

Dr Pepper Glaze

Some folks like to replace the water fro baking or boiling a ham with Dr Pepper. This slight adaptation from The Pioneer Woman Cooks uses Dr Pepper to create a shiny sweet glaze, and makes enough for a largish (15-20 lb) ham.

3 cups brown sugar

½ teaspoon ground cloves
½ cup spicy brown mustard
1 can Dr Pepper
3 tablespoons apple cider vinegar

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. About an hour before the ham is done, remove it to a baking sheet and keep warm. Combine the ingredients in a saucepan and bring to a boil. Cook, stirring frequently, until thickened, about 15 minutes. Brush one coat of glaze on the ham and return it to the oven for about 20 minutes. Repeat this process until all of the glaze is gone and the ham is shiny and brown. Remove the ham from the oven at let it rest for 15-20 minutes before slicing.

Cat Head Biscuits

There is nothing feline about these biscuits, but they are fluffy and big as a cat's head, just right for sopping up gravy or piling high with thinly sliced country ham. Place a stack of these on a pretty platter for family and friends to gnaw on throughout Christmas day, ala open-house style. Unlike regular biscuits, cat head biscuits are traditionally made with only the cook's hands, no biscuit cutter needed. Old timey cooks will tell you to use a cake flour such as White Lily brand for biscuit making, but just between us, as long as you don't overwork them, regular flour will do in a pinch. **4 cups light flour, such as White Lily**
2 tablespoons baking powder
½ teaspoon baking soda
1 teaspoon salt, optional
1 cup cold lard or shortening
About 1 ½ cups buttermilk
Bacon grease, for brushing, optional

Preheat oven to 425 degrees. Grease a large iron skillet or two 9-inch round cake pans with shortening. In a large bowl, use your fingers to combine the flour, baking powder, baking soda and salt. Cut the lard/shortening into chunks and work your hands through the mixture until it resembles small peas. For the best biscuits, you should still have little pieces of fat in the mixture. Add the buttermilk and gently mix in by hand until the flour becomes a soft, wet dough. Don't overmix it or you will end up with hockey pucks instead of biscuits. I like to have my dough wet enough that there is a little buttermilk left in the bottom of the bowl, but if it seems too wet for you add a touch more flour. A good cat head biscuit dough should be sticky and fairly messy to work with. Pinch off the dough into 12 equal pieces and shape them into a more or less ball shape with your hands - they will resemble a big glob of drop cookie dough. Place the biscuits next to one another in the pan. Bake for about 15-20 minutes or until nicely browned on top. Remove them from the oven and brush with a little bacon grease, if desired. Makes 12 biscuits.