



# A point of differentiation: Iberian pork

Iberian pork has been traditionally produced in Spain over many centuries. This type of production evolved as a way to take advantage of natural resources in the southwest of Spain. This area (Dehesa) has very specific climatic conditions with very hot summers and mild springs and autumns.

The landscape in this area is the result of the interaction between man and nature. It is basically a low density wood, predominantly of holm oak trees, and soil vegetation which reseeds itself annually. The presence of animal herbivores is necessary for this annual cycle to be completed.

## Facts and figures

Total sow herd included within the Iberic group is 180,000 sows of which only 60,000 are purebred. In terms of animals slaughtered in 2010, 2.5 million animals were slaughtered under the Iberian pork brand; of those, 600,000 animals had been produced under extensive conditions and 1.9 million under intensive rearing conditions. Most of the animals from this last group were crossbred animals. Total Iberian pork represents over 6% of the total pig production in Spain.

The holm oak tree produces a significant amount of acorns (Bellota) during autumn and winter. These fruits are very dense energetically and contain a high level of unsaturated fatty acids. Together with the grass, they are the main constituents of the diet of pure Iberic pigs.

The Iberic pig belongs to a specific breed with some sub-breeds within it. As a common characteristic, these animals are very rustic and well adapted to their environment. Externally they have a thin bone structure, relatively long legs, and dark hair (black or reddish depending on the subtype). The weight of adult sows of average body condition is usually not more than 150kg. Internally, these pigs have a strong tendency to accumulate fat within their bodies, both subcutaneous and intramuscular.

This genetic characteristic, together with the particular growing and finishing conditions provide the very special taste

and texture to the meat of these animals, which makes it so appreciated by the consumer.

The finishing period is from October to March. During this season, grass and acorns are the sole sources of feed for the animals.

Weight gain during this season is much higher, reaching levels from 0.8 to 1 kg per day. Most of this gain is in the form of fat.

From November onwards, animals that reach approximately 160kg liveweight are slaughtered. Animals which do not reach this slaughtering weight at the end of the season may be supplemented with grains, although its quality grade is lower, and hence their economic value. Average slaughtering age is about 18 months.

This calendar is followed with very little variation due to two facts:

- It permits an optimum use of natural resources for the growth of the animals.
- Since most of the meat from these animals is being commercially cured, the animals need to be slaughtered at a time when the ambient temperature is low enough to enable the curing process to take place.

Since this type of traditional production is very limited (only two pigs per hectare may be produced this way), in an attempt to increase production to supply a growing demand at a more affordable price, there are some mixed systems where the sows are crossbred with Duroc boars to increase prolificacy of the sows and performance

**Hams are usually found in specialised restaurants. The small buckets are used to prevent fat droplets falling from the hams due to the low melting point of their unsaturated fatty acids.**



parameters of the progeny. These sows are usually managed similarly to sows produced under intensive production systems.

Their piglets will usually go into the growing and finishing phase in an adaptation of the conventional system where the animals are kept in confinement (usually indoors) and fed commercial feeds formulated to provide the same fatty acid profile as the animals produced traditionally.

Sometimes a mixed system may be adopted where the animals, even though fed commercial feeds, are finished outdoors in very large pens in order to promote exercise. Slaughter weight is also close to 150kg live weight.

Within this more intensive type of production, and due to the high feed intake of the animals, the supplements chosen to be included in the feeds are critical, both to improve productivity of the animals and to maintain the high quality status of the end product.

## Commercial value

Most of the meat from the Iberian pig is sold as cured products. Hams and front legs are the most valuable cuts, followed by the loins. Other meat cuts are used to produce different types of salami-like products. Some specific cuts are consumed fresh, although it represents a very small percentage of the total Iberian pork consumption.

Even though the fat content of Iberian pork products is usually high, the fatty acid profile is such that within Spain it is considered a very healthy food, and moderate consumption is recommended even to patients suffering from coronary heart disease.

The curing process itself also has a huge impact on the quality of the final product. For example, some of the highest quality hams may require to be cured for up to four years in order to reach the top quality grades.

This process certainly has a large cost, but since production is very limited, the selling price is also high: a very good quality ham may be worth around €1000, with very few top ones reaching record prices of up to €3000. ■