

Uncle Billy's Homemade Hams
The Perfect Cure
By Joel Bourne
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My first memory of Uncle Bill Long's ham goes back to a Christmas dinner long ago. I was a shirttail boy of eight, and my family had been invited to Uncle Billy's big white farmhouse near Garysburg, North Carolina. There, among 30 or 40 relatives, we lined up (children first) to cruise the sideboard, plates in hand, and help ourselves to my aunt's Southern cooking. I remember squash casserole, candied yams, butterbeans and snaps, and collards boiled hard and long into a wonderful deep green mush. There was turkey with oyster dressing and cranberry salad, rice and gravy, and hot rolls for dipping and shoving. The desserts were nearby: plum pudding and fruitcake, ambrosia and pecan pie, and, of course, my Aunt June's legendary caramel cake, which had faithful fans in three countries.

Reigning over the sideboard like King Solomon on his throne was a ham cured by Uncle Billy. Deep red on the inside, covered with cloves and a mahogany glaze of molasses and brown sugar on the outside, its aroma filled the dining room. I remember nearly transparent slices, rimmed with thin strips of fat, on a white dinner plate. With my mouth watering and my eyes already feasting, my ears turned deaf to my mother's warnings not to eat too much because "it would give us children bad dreams." (After one Christmas ham-eating binge, legend has it that my cousin Henry awoke among ripped sheets and tossed blankets.) This was strong stuff, I was told--an acquired, grown-up taste, like okra or good bourbon.

I ate too much anyway. I still remember taking small forkfuls of the ham (a taste that can only be described now as dark, hard,

and mysterious, and smacking of salt, smoke, and spices), carefully lacing it between bits of soft rolls, and then dousing the whole thing with red-eye gravy. A native of ham country (smoked hams from places like Gwaltney and Smithfield have made the area famous), I feel justified to state--unequivocally and with all prejudices firmly in place--that my Uncle Billy makes the best country ham in the world. A modest man of 64 and a churchgoer, he would scoff at such praise--but he wouldn't deny it. He learned it from his mother, Caroline, when he was a boy, and he's been doing it steadily, almost as a revival, for the last 15 years. And like all things he cherishes from a simpler time (including his Model A pickup or his 1935 meat slicer), Uncle Billy's happy to tell you all about it--just as long as you're happy to listen.

When I went to visit him early this fall, the farm was bustling with activity. Cousin Duna's wedding was set for the following weekend, and the whole family of six girls, several husbands, and numerous grandchildren were working in the yard getting ready for it. I found Uncle Billy behind the house wiring lights to one of the half-dozen outbuildings scattered around the place.

"So you want to know about hams," he said, in all seriousness. "Well, I tell you. The key to keeping good hams...is to keep your smokehouse locked." He leads the way down a path in the yard, shoos tame ducks from underfoot, to where two small buildings back up to a soybean field. He tells me about how, every January when he was a boy, they'd kill 30 to 40 hogs fattened on corn and peanuts to feed the family and the farmhands. It was the social event of the season, and all the people who worked and lived on the farm turned out to help. The men did the butchering, the women took care of the organs and scraps to make chit'lins and sausage, and the children tried not to get in the way. Nothing was wasted or thrown away, not even the hair, which was saved for stuffing mattresses or making plaster. "We used to say you used everything but the squeal," laughs Uncle Billy. These days, however, he buys

fresh "green" hams from a local slaughterhouse.

We stop in front of the salt house, a cinder-block building with plaster walls and tables to one side. The door is heavy, thick, and insulated. As with so much else on a farm, says Uncle Billy, the first thing you need for successful ham-curing is the right weather--a cold snap in January with temperatures in the high 20s to low 30s at night. He brings the green hams into the salt house and lays them on the table. Meat cools just like it cooks, from the outside in, he says, and the meat has to drop to about 40°F next to the bone, a process that usually takes overnight. When it's cold, he explains, the fat stays solid. The next morning he pours a layer of salt on the table and begins to cover the meat with it, rubbing it in, moving the joints, adding more salt until it "starts feelin' stiff." For his annual 24 hams, he buys 50 to 100 pounds of salt.

A ham has two sides, the skin side and the fresh-meat side. When he finishes working the meat, he lays it on the table skin-side down and covers it with a layer of salt one-half inch to an inch deep. "When it's blood-red fresh, it has a tremendous amount of moisture," Uncle Billy says. "The salt is going to penetrate the meat quickly. And don't forget: The meat will absorb the salt until it reaches equilibrium. The first few days are critical until the salt gets to the bone. When the humidity is high, it's ideal. As it penetrates the meat that salt will disappear like melting snow."

Four things influence the salting process: the thickness of the meat, the moisture of the meat, the humidity of the air, and the temperature. Since it's tough to control the temperature and humidity, the salt house was built with thick walls and insulation to trap the cold inside.

After the initial salting, Uncle Billy goes back to the salt house three or four days later and adds another layer of salt, working

the joints again to help it penetrate. He returns again seven

or eight days later and repeats the process, then leaves the hams in the salt house for most of February. He stresses that cold dampness is what you need. If there are a few bluebird eggs in February, which is not uncommon in North Carolina, he'll bring several 100-pound blocks of ice into the salt house to keep the ham cold until the weather returns to normal.

"After four to five weeks, the salt content is stabilized--the same at the surface as at the center," Uncle Billy says. "Then you have preserved your meat. You could hang it on the back porch and it would be fine all summer."

Salt may preserve a ham, but smoking makes it worth eating. In early March, Uncle Billy takes the hams from the salt house, fills a metal washtub with warm water, and washes them "just like a baby." He then mixes borax (found in the detergent section of your local grocer) and black pepper at a ratio of about a half can of pepper to a 32-ounce box of detergent, although he won't admit to exact measures. "I just mix it in till it looks right, like that," he says, showing me the box of soap flecked with black specks of pepper. It usually takes 10 to 12 boxes of borax and six cans of pepper. He covers the hams with a thin coat of the mixture, which toughens the skin to keep bugs out. Next, he takes a can of crushed red pepper and pours it on the exposed hock until the whole end of the ham turns red. He repeats the process on the fresh side

where the clavicle blade sticks up through the meat. "That'll keep the skippers out," he says, referring to the larval stage of a fly, which can be the bane of a ham's existence. "They'll eat the damn meat up."

Once the ham is thoroughly coated, Uncle Billy pokes a hole in the thick end with an ice pick, makes a loop of rustproof copper wire, and hangs it in the smokehouse, hock down.

The smokehouse sits next to the salt house, a square, white clapboard building of pine siding and cedar shingles, with a pointed red roof that is as high as the walls are tall. Uncle Billy opens the heavy latch on the door, and we step inside, enveloped by

the darkness and the sharp smell of smoke and aging meat. He flicks on a bare light bulb, revealing a concrete floor with a sunken circular fire pit in the middle and a table to one side. Above us, hanging on hand-turned wooden pegs, a dozen hams are suspended. Shafts of light beam down through cracks in the roof. Unlike the salt house, which is built thick and tight, ventilation is key here.

Three wooden tiers ring the smokehouse rafters. The top tier is for new meat. Two-year-old hams hang on the second tier, and three-year-old hams are on the bottom, so that my Aunt Mildred, who stands about 5'3" in her stocking feet, can retrieve them easily with the help of a long pole made just for that purpose. When the new hams are ready for smoking, Uncle Billy takes the older hams and stores them temporarily in the salt house. The new meat goes on the bottom tier, about three feet overhead.

Good smoking weather, says Uncle Billy, is like good duck-hunting weather "I want it to be miserable--damp and cold." But the secret that distinguishes his cured hams from others is the wood he uses for smoking. In the summer when he prunes his fruit trees, Uncle Billy saves all the prunings down to the smallest twig. He has peach and pear trees, but apple wood is favorite, and he makes sure he has several armfuls. He cuts a few extra armloads of young sassafras, which grows wild along a nearby fence row, and stores it all in a dry place until March.

The day before he's ready to smoke, Uncle Billy goes into the woods and fells a hickory sapling as big around as your thigh and cuts it into one-foot lengths. The next day, at seven in the morning, he starts a small fire in the fire pit, using newspaper and the fruitwood kindling. (Any other starter would taint the meat.) He stays with it all day, adding wood and adjusting the fire until he goes to bed that night.

"Once I get the fire going, I get it hot as hell," he says. "I wait till it burns down. Then I put the green wood on the fire. That's when the smoke starts." The idea in smoking is not to cook

the meat but to let the smoke enhance its flavor. If the fat starts to drip, then the fire is too hot. The smoke is the important thing; that's why the smokehouse is well ventilated. The ham will be blond when it comes in, with a clear white skin. Uncle Billy smokes it until it turns a rich mahogany color. Then his part of the process is over: The rest is up to the meat and time.

After a few months, the hams often grow a thin patina of mold on the skin, which Uncle Billy says "suits them just fine. It's a sign of good moisture and maturity. Aging has got more to do with it than anything I do. Folks who make liquor will tell you the same thing." Although he has eaten the milder, one-year-old hams his children seem to prefer, for Uncle Billy a ham doesn't reach its full potential until the third year. "Three-year-old meat gets hard, red, and stringy," he says. It has a bite to it. It sure is good eating."

Salt-cured and smoked, the new hams go to the top tier to age. The only thing left to do is wait and check them periodically for skippers. The best way to discourage the insects is to keep the smokehouse clean and dark. Insects, Uncle Billy explains, are attracted to light. So if you keep it dark you'll keep it safe. Should the skippers get

in anyway, he'll put his hams in the freezer for a day and scrub the smokehouse until "it's as clean as a hospital."

"The old generation had all these little things they did," Uncle Billy says. "Put them together and you never have to worry about chemicals to keep the bugs out. Like room. If you've got space and room, things seem to work better. The commercial boys wouldn't think of building this big a space for a few hams. They can control the humidity and the temperature. But when you get right down to it, I'll put mine against theirs any time. The proof of the pudding is in the eating, isn't it?"

Uncle Billy has never sold a ham, despite receiving many offers to buy them. The few he has donated to his church's charity auctions have sold for as much as \$75. This year, however, only the

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bottom tier is full of hams. When I ask him about it, he shrugs and kicks the ground with his boot. "I'll be 65 in February, and I plan to retire. None of these kids are interested in doing it, so these will be the last of them."

A week later I was at Cousin Duna's wedding reception, standing in line beside a table packed with food. A woman from up north was in front of me. She picked up a ham biscuit and took a delicate bite. "Oh, that's very salty," she said.

"Well," I offered, "it's a bit of an acquired taste."