

# That'll do, pig

At once sumptuous yet simple, a ham is an age-old tradition that, for many, is the real highlight of the Christmas feasting. Flora Watkins digs in

**F**OR some, Christmas doesn't really get under way until Carols from King's and the first strains of *Once in Royal David's City* on the wireless. However, for Neale Hollingsworth of Dukeshill Ham in Shropshire, the festivities begin a week earlier, when he loads up his car to make a very special delivery.

'I always know that Christmas has arrived because I personally take The Queen's hams to Sandringham,' Mr Hollingsworth divulges. Since receiving the Royal Warrant in 2003, 'it's become a bit of a tradition'.

Around the country, from royal households to the more humble, Christmas hams, in their glazed and clove-studded Dickensian glory, are central to the festivities—and have been for centuries. Ham has been used as feast food since the time of the Romans, explains writer and food historian Kate Colquhoun, author of *Taste: The Story of Britain Through Its Cooking* (Bloomsbury, £12.99): 'Apicius has recipes for boiled and spiced honeyed hams and "pig" is an Anglo-Saxon word.'

This was a celebratory food that could be enjoyed by rich and poor alike. 'Other meat was expensive, but a pig was the thing that nearly every peasant had,' notes Miss Colquhoun. 'They'd put it in the wood in the autumn, to forage on beech nuts, slaughter it and preserve it to have meat through the winter.'

Hogs would be killed at Michaelmas and made into sausages and black pudding, with flitches of bacon hung in the chimney to smoke by the fire. When the time came to eat the hams, they would be boiled, then dressed according to fashion and status. >

**A feast fit for a king—and a peasant, and a farmer and everyone else at Christmas**



Mustard seed was what peasants had access to, but, for the rich, hams could be ‘carriers of fashion’, according to Miss Colquhoun. They would have been decorated with spices in the Middle Ages and, in the Tudor period, oranges, which were fashionable and new.

In her *Book of Household Management*, published in 1861, Mrs Beeton gives a recipe for ham that’s familiar to many of us. Readers are advised to simmer it with vegetables and herbs, then strip off the skin and ‘sprinkle over bread-raspings, or, if wanted particularly nice, glaze it’.

Food writer Tom Parker Bowles will glaze his ham with marmalade and stud it with cloves for ‘that taste of Christmas’. ‘There’s a fashion now for Pata Negra, which is wonderful, but, at this time of year, what you want is a whole [traditional] ham, kept in the larder,’ he stresses. ‘You can have it with eggs for breakfast or with a baked potato for lunch. I can’t walk past the room it’s in without a knife.’

## ‘If you’ve got a festive ham in the fridge, you know that every meal is sorted’

Mr Hollingsworth concurs that this is one of the great joys of a festive ham: ‘It’s such a stalwart over the Christmas period—if you’ve got one in the fridge, you know that every meal is sorted, whether it’s people popping in for drinks or unexpected guests.’

With a large ham, he continues, you’ll be ‘picking at it until Twelfth Night’—apart, that is, from the year when Labrador Sidney found it cooling on a table in the garden. This necessitated a swift trip back to Dukeshill HQ to pick up more and Sidney spent December 28 at the vet’s, having his stomach pumped.

Sidney’s nemesis was a Wiltshire ham, the company’s bestseller. Cured in a brine of water, salt and a little sugar for several days, the meat is then kept for another week for the flavour to develop, before being cooked.

Wiltshire ham is also what Sandridge Farm, near Chippenham, is famous for. If director Rosemary Keen (her husband, Brian, farms the pigs) has a party over Christmas, she’ll typically serve one hot with parsley sauce.

On Christmas Eve, however, she hopes to have one of her Somerset sweet-cure hams left over, to eat cold with pickles and beetroot. Called the Brumham, this ham is cured with black treacle and juniper berries.

In taste, explains Mrs Keen, it’s similar to the historic Bradenham ham, which was made in the county from the late 18th century, until some years ago. The flavour is ‘distinctive’, both strong and sweet, she continues, and it can evoke strong feelings either way.



Ham is delicious marinated in black porter, glazed with treacle or even cooked in ginger beer

It was the singular taste of the Suffolk black hams made by Emmett’s of Peasenhall in Suffolk that caught the attention of the Queen Mother. Emmett’s, which is now owned by former Harrods food manager Mark Thomas, supplied Her Majesty for 36 years.

‘The only tweak I’ve made was to change the beer they’re marinated in from Guinness to Nethergate Suffolk black porter,’ says Mr Thomas, as he turns the gammons—they have to be rotated every day for six weeks, by hand. ‘I don’t go to the gym—I lift hams,’ he chuckles. Afterwards, they are smoked for a month, then simmered gently for some 12 hours.

There’s ‘no need for a glaze because they have so much flavour,’ Mr Thomas explains. It’s a testament to that flavour that the vegan girlfriend of his brother felt compelled to try some of the black ham when she came to the shop. OBEs have been awarded for less.

Like the Bradenham, another traditional British treat, York ham, had all but disappeared until it was resurrected by artisan producers, including Dukeshill. This dry-cured ham, a little saltier than the Wiltshire, is the original source of the company’s Royal Warrant.

York ham may no longer be produced in that city, but, on the edge of the Yorkshire Dales, Lishman’s of Ilkley produces a honey-mustard Yorkshire ham that can be eaten cold or hot.

‘If I have my way—and I shan’t, my Christmas Day eating would consist of an omelette and cold ham,’ wrote the doyenne of food writers, Elizabeth David. She may have had her own Barbados Baked and Glazed Gammon in mind (a glaze of soft brown sugar, mustard and milk). However, whether boiled or baked, cooked in Coca-Cola, à la Nigella, or ginger beer, as Sarah Hollingsworth, wife of Neale, prefers, there’s no doubt that many are in sympathy with Miss David.

‘I could do without the turkey—horrible Victorian *arriviste!*—and the mince pies, but, for me, it wouldn’t be Christmas without the ham,’ grumbles Mr Parker-Bowles. Whereas the main component of Christmas lunch itself might have changed from beef (as 18th-century parson James Woodforde enjoyed in his *Diary of a Country Parson*) to goose or turkey—popularised by Dickens in *A Christmas Carol*—ham is a constant.

‘I really don’t know why I don’t have one for the rest of the year, because I do love ham,’ muses Mr Parker Bowles. Year-round ham? Now, that really is something to celebrate. 🐷

### Hamming it up: five of the best

- Whole bone-in Wiltshire ham (minimum 4.8kg (10½lb)), £87, Dukeshill (0345 370 0129; [www.dukeshillham.co.uk](http://www.dukeshillham.co.uk))

- Wiltshire-cure roasted ham on the bone (2.5kg (5½lb)), £50, Waitrose (0800 188 884; [www.waitrose.com](http://www.waitrose.com))



- Whole Suffolk black ham on the bone (7.5kg (16½lb)), £185.63, Emmett’s (01728 660250; [www.emmettsham.co.uk](http://www.emmettsham.co.uk))

- Honey-mustard Yorkshire ham (4kg (9lb)), £66, Lishman’s of Ilkley (01943 609436; [www.lishmansbutchers.co.uk](http://www.lishmansbutchers.co.uk))

- Chipnam Wiltshire-cure boneless ham (4kg (9lb) minimum), £65, Sandridge Farmhouse Bacon (01380 850304; [www.sandridgefarmhousebacon.co.uk](http://www.sandridgefarmhousebacon.co.uk))

