

MEATING PLACE

AT THE AMERICAN CURED MEAT CHAMPIONSHIPS, LEARNING THE SIGNS OF QUALITY

Written by

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A ham is not merely a cut from a pig's hind leg, a turkey not simply a golden holiday centerpiece, a salami not just an air-dried cylindrical sausage.

At least not at the American Cured Meat Championships, the country's largest cured meat contest.

The event, a highlight of the American Association of Meat Processors annual convention, took place June 16-18 this year at the Peppermill Resort Spa Casino.

The contest featured more than 500 cured meats crafted by 130 producers representing nearly 20 states.

The meats, which were blind judged, ranged from a fresh, clean smoked bison roast to chewy pork jerky finishing with a spicy rush.

The producers were medium- and small-size outfits, most with fewer than 25 employees. And Midwest entries dominated, not surprising considering the region's long history of meat processing.

To the civilian eye, the ranks of brawny hams and mahogany sausages and snack sticks piled like kindling might have seemed indistinguishable within their categories, but each was fashioned (and would be rigorously judged) according to longtime requirements for appearance, texture, color, aroma and flavor.

Minor deviations from the breed standard made the difference between first place and 15th.

This fierce competition -- winners received bragging and marketing rights -- was characteristic of the contest, but there was more than prestige in play, said Dr. Jay Wenther, AAMP executive director.

"It's also an opportunity for the better processors to talk to the other processors, for the producer in 15th place to talk to first place and say, 'Hey, how did you get that color in your meat?' Education is a big part of this."

Slice me

To keep the meat safe and in prime condition, the contest room was chilled by the Peppermill to at least 55 F, as stipulated in the convention contract.

Judges in hair nets and white plastic smocks bent over long tables -- examining, slicing, smelling, tasting and discussing meats that encompassed 26 classes.

The outfits lent the proceedings a scientific flavor, entirely appropriate given that many judges ranked among the country's leading meat scientists.

And because the meats were being judged, they seemed at once specimen and sustenance, both objects of inquiry and hunks of protein that called out to be sliced.

In the game

Which is exactly what Dr. John Henson of California State University, Fresno, a specialty game meats judge, did with a chubby length of buffalo salami. What were some of the qualities he sought?

"Workmanship," Henson said. "Making sure there are no pockets or creases in the stuffing. A very uniform interior -- no voids -- and a good distribution of lean and fat and spice."

External color was important -- it should be uniform and deep, not dull or muddy -- "and you're also looking for robust flavor," added Sam Western of Western's Smokehouse in Greentop, Mo., the other judge.

Venison salami also made a showing, and like all the meats, it had been inspected before competition by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

"This isn't deer you shot on the prairie and brought in," said a laughing Rand Thomas, an AAMP member with Harbro Packaging Co. of Chicago.



Dr. John Henson of California State University, Fresno, a game meats judge at the American Cured Meat Championships held June 17 at the Peppermill casino, slices off samples of buffalo salami. Ideal salami has no air pockets, an even distribution of lean and fat, and robust flavor. Andy Barron/RGJ

Light and dark



A dozen plump smoked turkeys await judging at the American Cured Meat Championships on June 17 at the Peppermill casino. Among other things, the judges, rear, looked for exteriors with uniform smoked color and texture that wasn't too dry or coarse-grained. / Andy Barron/RGJ

Some processors trucked their meats to Reno in coolers; others shipped theirs by overnight delivery. A few containers initially went astray at the Peppermill, but come judging day on June 17, all the meats had made it to the tables.

More than two dozen coarse ground frankfurters were assessed. Children, not surprising, have much to do with a furter's commercial success.

"If kids like it, you've got it made," said judge Michael P. Eickman of Eickman's Processing Co. in Seward, Ill.

But pumped-up split-open frankfurters, which many children also like, aren't desirable "because you lose your juice, your flavor; it's not a good texture."

Texture was important as well to judges of a dozen chesty smoked turkeys with their legs and wings modestly tucked back.

The judges sliced off wedges of both light and dark meat, downgrading turkey that was too dry or too coarse-grained, too salty or too bland.

Ham standards

Many processors have crafted their meats the same way for generations, said Thomas, the AAMP member, but "they know their markets are changing. Even in small towns, people are looking at nitrates, grass fed, salt and fat content, and how to get the salt content down."

The challenge, of course, is balancing consumer expectations about meat color, texture and flavor with their concerns about eating healthier.

In fact, the contest standards for ham, lightweight and heavyweight, already addressed salt. Judges cooked half-slices of ham and downgraded any that were too salty.

Overpowering ham spices and excessive inflation with curing solution also earned demerits.

And then there was the questions of edges.

Pale-edged ham can be a sign of PSE condition, explained Dr. Kohl Schrader of Devro Inc., a Charlotte, N.C., manufacturer of food casings. "The meat proteins are damaged during processing, so the ham splits and can't hold its juices."



The winner of the bone-in heavyweight (above 18 pounds) ham at the American Cured Meat Championships held June 17 at the Peppermill casino. A desirable ham possesses deep pink color, firm texture, and good meat flavor without too much salt or ham spice. Andy Barron/RGJ

Up early



Dr. Kohl Schrader of Devro Inc., a Charlotte, N.C., manufacturer of food casings, takes an exploratory bite of a meat snack snack entry in the American Cured Meat Championships held June 17 at the Peppermill. The snack stick class had dozens of entries. Andy Barron/RGJ

Snack items filled the competition. Meat sticks were judged by Schrader, who inhaled deeply to test aroma. Small-diameter smoked and cooked sausages were studded with newfangled ingredients like fruit, cheese, nuts and jalapeño chiles.

And piles of ragged jerky -- mostly beef, but a few pork versions, too (pork jerky is less shelf stable than beef).

Good jerky should offer an appealing aroma, the right amount of smoke and textural balance.

"You don't want it to be rubbery," said Dan Sehnert of the University of California, Davis. "It shouldn't crack like a cracker," but "it should be dry enough so the flavor builds."

Awards for the jerkys and snack meats and hams and frankfurters and turkeys and game meats and others would be awarded beginning at 7:30 a.m. on June 18.

Meat people are morning people. And the early bird, it seems, gets the cure.