About The Pleasures Of Pig-Curing At Home

By Geoffrey Boumphrey

Is there any more beautiful word in the language than 'ham'—unless it is 'bacon'—or, better still, 'bacon and eggs'—or 'ham and eggs' for that matter? Yes! They are beautiful words, I think, and I am prepared to argue about it. Who was it who said that beauty lies in the eye of the beholder? Someone with authority, I know. Well, you have only to substitute another sense-organ for the eye, and ham passes the test with flying colours.

But, you know, I have an awful feeling that I may be talking to part of a generation that does not know what ham is, or at any rate what it can be. By ham I do not mean that bright-pink, moist stuff that tastes so much of salt. Real ham is a soft, almost greyish-pink and the lean is not moist, it is almost dry, and the fibres have matured and softened until the general texture is almost crumbly.

But enough of this preliminary appetite-whetting: let us get down to brass tacks. One of the reasons for living in the country (if any reason needs to be given) is that in the country it is generally possible to keep a pig.

One of the many grand things about pigs is that they are far the most efficient food-converters of any domestic animal. You can reckon that of all the valuable food you give them (during adolescence, that is,) about one-fifth remains in the pig, largely as bacon—or ham. There is another advantage, too, in the single-mindedness with which a pig concentrates on its life's work of putting on weight.

Long before the butcher comes, you will be estimating the weight of the hams, and even visualizing the long flanks neatly divided into rashers—all this without the slightest feeling of tactlessness. I will admit that my first pig-killing day did not dawn without a slight sense of uneasiness; but I was raw, and did not quite know what to expect.

Now, those two occasions in the year are red-letter days, as they have been in Merrie England for hundreds of years. The butcher arrives in his van, bringing his assistant with him. The pig has not been fed for twenty-four hours, and so is interested in nothing in the world except the contents of the bucket that he follows obligingly to the appointed place. There is a slight report and he is wafted to the Elysian fields, in the final belief that, at last, he is going to get his head down in that bucket that smells so good. A beautiful end—which of us, with his mentality, would ask for anything better?

Perhaps an hour later, Mr. Brown, as I will call him, and his assistant, come into my kitchen; and we drink a tankard or two of beer. The conversation follows rather the lines used when you go to see somebody's new baby. I am left with the impression (just as the mother ought to be) that I have been a very efficient producer, and that the product is one of the finest specimens seen round these parts for many a long day. Also, there is the great fun of guessing the weight. Mr. Brown thinks it will make every pound of twelve score; I say, modestly, that I should think it will top eleven score, at any rate.

There was an occasion when the weight was eighteen score, and there, hanging from the beams, was a vast carcass like a mammoth's; but, nowadays, apart from the kudos of having reared such a pig, I like them about ten or twelve score. Brightwell Brandy—what a pig she was! The quint-essence of food conversation!

As soon as the carcass has been weighed, it is let down with block and tackle, and cut up ready for curing. There are many different ways of doing this, according to whether you want a long ham or a round one, how much you are going to use fresh as roast pork, and so on. Personally, I always find there are so many bits and pieces which have to be used up more or less fresh (to say nothing of brawn) that I cure almost everything possible; two hams cut short and round), two shoulders, two Bath chaps (or cheeks), and two sides of bacon, including the neck.

Many Different Methods of Curing

I did not start out with the idea of doing my own curing, when I first kept a pig. I meant to send it away to a bacon factory to be cured for me, as most of my friends do. In fact, I made a tour of their houses in turn, to taste their pig and see which factory's cure I liked best. But, as my pig grew fatter, memories of the hams I had eaten long ago came to haunt me, and I decided I would cure the the hams, at least, myself, and send the rest away to be done.

Even that reservation perished after a chat with a farmer friend of mine, and a taste of his home-cured bacon and ham. He said it was easy enough, and he offered to lend me the tub he cured his ham in. I borrowed a wooden trough from somebody else to do the sides of bacon in. That sounds a lot of equipment, but I have simplified things since then. I found that an ordinary earthenware bread-crock just holds one ham and one shoulder, and a curing trough is not necessary if you have a long, narrow table and an outhouse floor that you do not mind getting in rather a mess.

Then I started collecting recipes and analyzing them. I should think I got about forty in all—and they all boiled down to about four different methods of curing, with minor variations. I went out for simplicity and quality. With my first two pigs I tried about eight different cures, and kept notes to compare with the results. Now I have standardized on two, a simple one for the everyday bacon, and a more exotic one for the less frequent ham.

Both start in the traditional way—a good rubbing all over with salt and a small proportion of saltpetre: say half an hour's work in all; the same next day, only shorter. On the third day, when the salt will have drawn most of the surplus moisture out of the meat, the cures divide. The bacon and Bath chaps stay on the table and go on getting about five minutes' rubbing a day with the salt and saltpetre mixtures, plus a bit of Demarara sugar—that is said to keep the lean soft.

The hams and shoulders go into their bread-crocks, and for them I make up a wonderful brew of strong beer or stout, molasses or black treacle, a seasoning of all-spice, coriander, and black pepper, a handful of salt and saltpetre, a shallot, and a good measure of juniper berries. This is boiled up, allowed to cool, and then poured over the joints. Each day, their position is reversed, and they are thoroughly basted with the brew.

How long you continue the curing depends on how long you want the meat to keep. I generally cure one side of bacon for just over a fortnight, which means it will keep safely for six months, and the other I give about three weeks, so that it is safe for a year. I do not think a ham or shoulder develops its flavor until it has matured for at least six months, so they are kept in the brew about eight or ten days for every inch of thickness.

The catch about it is that the longer you cure, the saltier the meat and the harder the lean tends to be, though you can offset this to a great extent in the case of bacon by soaking each chunk in water for a night as you cut it off the side, before slicing it into rashers.

And, by the way, does everyone know the best way to arrange bacon for cooking—frying, or, much better, grilling? Overlap the slices like tiles on a roof, screening each lean side from the heat with the fat side of the piece next to it; in this way you can cook the fat thoroughly, still keeping the lean safe.

After curing, wash the meat in cold water (soft water is best; and, personally, I soak mine overnight in it). Then hang up the joints or sides to dry in a not-too-cold room for three weeks or a month. After that, they are best somewhere cool. Sprinkle them with pepper, and sew them up in bags, but not only to keep flies away (which is the idea of the pepper) but also to protect them from the light, which turns the fat yellow.

Could anything be simpler? Hardly any equipment, half-an-hour's work the first day; ten minutes the second or third—and then only seven or eight each day until the cure is complete. And the reward? Well, I have just finished eating the last ham of Brightwell Brandy, fifteen months old. It was black outside, and hard as a board, but it swelled out like a sponge after a week's soaking.

Who talks of boiling ham? It was simmered gently for nearly four hours, and then allowed to grow almost cold in the water it had cooked in. I skinned it tenderly, drained it, and sprinkled it with bread crumbs while it just still had the chill off. I wish I could describe to you the aroma that filled the dining-room when I cut the first few slices.

I happened to have staying with me a friend who is chairman of the kitchen and wine committees of a big London club. His face was positively transfigured: 'Why,' he cried, 'that ham has a bouquet like an old wine!' We ate with some reverence, and were not disappointed. Could a factory cure have done that for us?

The point I would make is that here in home-curing is an age-old craft not really very difficult to learn, needing little or no equipment. We complain nowadays that our food is dull, and we have to go without many delicacies that were once imported at reasonable prices. But the humble pig, properly treated, can yield food fit for an epicure or for the gods themselves, and the mere process of curing is not without fascination. The pig has been the mainstay of English rural life since Saxon times, and probably before then. Call me a chaw-bacon—a yokel? Why shouldn't I be? I am proud of it. (Broadcast in the BBC's Home Service).

"Water's fine, but it can wait," four-year-old Johnny Zeek seems to be telling his dad, Edward, as he applies the brakes to admire certain aspects of the view on the beach. Who knows, maybe if he does his double somersault she'll cut the cosmetics and give him a tumble. The heart-throb is Judy Miller, four.

Gave Him Palace But Wouldn't Pay

The eighteenth century was only four years old when the French armies were broken in a fierce battle fought in the tiny village of Blenheim. And all England went mad in adulation of the man who had won that great victory.

What form should a nation's gratitude take? Queen Anne did not consult Parliament, but declared: "He shall have the ancient Manor of Woodstock. The old, dilapidated home of the Plantagenets shall disappear: a noble palace shall rise in its place."

Parliament, informed as to Her Majesty's wishes, was also assured that the Queen intended to foot the bill herself. Accordingly an Act of Parliament was passed. The burning question of the hour then was: Who shall build this architectural masterpiece for the nation's hero?

Everybody expected that the choice would fall on Wren. But it didn't. The Queen told the Duke of Marlborough to pick his own architect and he chose John Vanbrugh, architect, playwright, man-about-town.

That decision laid the foundation for something that nobody had foreseen—a lasting, bitter quarrel between Vanbrugh, the playwright-architect, and Sarah, the brilliant, forceful and power-loving Duchess of Marlborough.

"The Queen rules England—The Duchess rules the Queen," was what people said behind their hands. And it was true!

Vanbrugh, who had already designed some magnificent great houses, drew up even more elaborate plans for the new palace. The Duke rubbed his hands: "Excellent!" he exclaimed. But the Duchess became incensed against the project. "Who will pay for all this? she inquired. "And who would live in such a place? Comfort comes before such show."

So great a building involved the problem of finding enough master masons. In the end Vanbrugh got masons from all parts of the country and a colony of craftsmen and working men settled in Woodstock

Then the troubles began. The local stone proved completely unsuitable and an alternative had to be used. That was bad enough. But presently the contractors were coming to Vanbrugh—who was doing this immense work for a modest $2,000 a year—for money.

It was awkward. Who was to pay? The Queen, from her private fortune? Parliament, out of the nation's resources? Or the millionaire Duke himself?

Neither the Queen nor Parliament had stated what limit was to be put on the cost of the project, although official documents stated that Vanbrugh had been appointed Comptroller of the Works, authorized to act on behalf of the Duke.

During the long years that Blenheim Palace was being built this unhappy situation led to much bickering. There were constant disputes about authority. There were incessant quarrels between Vanbrugh and the Duchess. There were periods when there was no money to pay the working people.

On one occasion arrears owing to the contractors, and wages owing to the workmen, led to a strike and threats of violence. The men said that they could not pay for their lodgings, and that before they went back to their homes they would wreck the half-built palace.

Vanbrugh, meant this palace to be his masterpiece. Unfortunately, what he never considered was money.

For example, as he had to come down from London very often (he was building the Opera House, Covent Garden, at the same time) he decided to renovate the old Woodstock Manor House. He had no authority to do this, and he put to work on it men employed on the palace. Having spent over $5,000, he casually mentioned it to the Duchess.

The great Sarah flew into a passion, accusing him of having spent $15,000 on himself, and calling him insulting names.

From first to last, on the financial side and in the human relations of those most closely concerned in this grandiloquent project, there had been nothing but the sordid. Nor did the death of the Duke change the situation.

He left over two million pounds, a fortune equivalent to $150,000,000 today. But he made no provision for the unpaid workmen or for Vanbrugh's modest wage. When the will was made public, Vanbrugh wrote to a friend: "And yet this Man would neither pay his Workmen their bills nor his Architect his Salary. But he had given his Widdow (may a Scotch Ensign get her) £10,000 a year to spoil Blenheim her own way; £1,200 a Year to keep her Self clean, and go to Law."

Thus to the end did bitterness poison the air as there arose one of the most magnificent palaces in the British Isles—Indeed, in the whole world.

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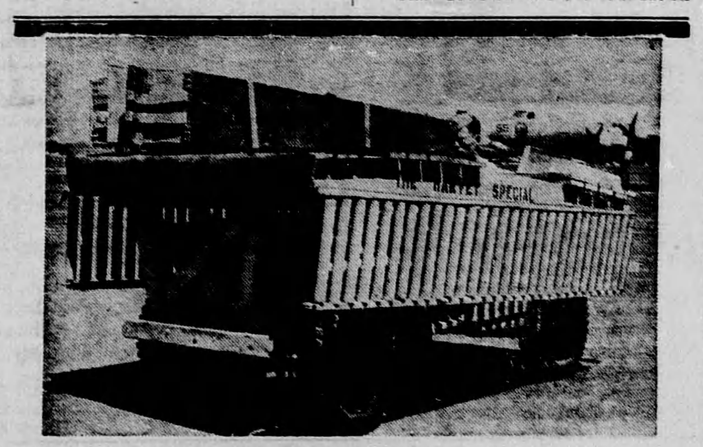
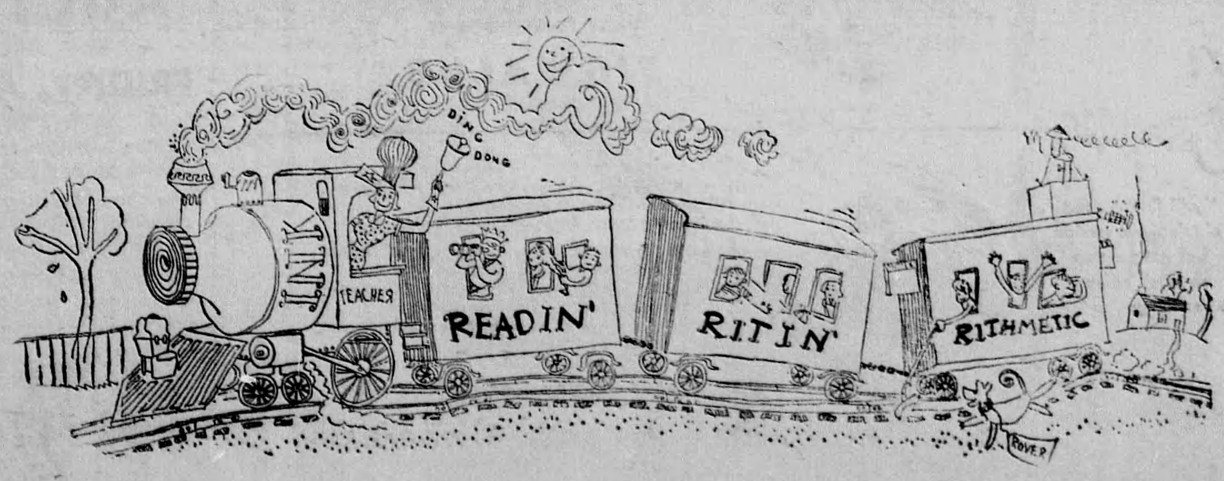
Nowadays, from all parts of the world crowds are flocking to this same Blenheim Palace, regal seat of the Dukes of Marlborough, recently opened to the public. As much as $1500 a day is being taken "at the doors." And the first request of nearly every visitor is to see the room where Winston Churchill was born. So many people gazing at his baby vest which is on view, giggle and wisecrack, "I bet he couldn't wear it today," that the guides sometimes nearly scream.



Merrily He Rollers Along—It's a jeep, but you'd hardly know it. The weird vehicle is the result of ingenuity at an Air Force field in Japan. It was born of the necessity for urgent haste in handling air cargoes. As soon as cargo plane lands, the "Harvey Special" jeep rushes to it with roller conveyors that speed up loading and unloading.

Gun but not forgotten—A plucky dare-devil, a Soviet spy, or just a foolhardy feathered friend? Soldiers are wondering just how to classify the sparrow who perched on the muzzle of a lethal tank gun during manoeuvres. After the weapon was fired, and the last wisp of smoke had cleared away, then could find no trace of the winged artillery observer.



IT WON'T BE LONG NOW