

THE EGERTON WAY
Country Ham

*Biscuit
 Love*

The country hams of Kentucky and other states can be bought commercially for roughly \$2-3/pound. State departments of agriculture and university schools of agriculture should have information on sources. Unfortunately, there are ersatz hams on the market — quick-cured, artificially smoked, often excessively salty or simply unfit to eat. Bona fide country hams must be cured with salt, and perhaps some added saltpeter and sugar, smoked for a month or more (ideally with hickory) and aged through a summer and fall. Anything less than a 9- or 10-month process should be considered suspect. A year is better, and many real ham lovers prefer 2-year-old hams.

HERE'S HOW MY GRANDMOTHER – AND HER MOTHER, MY MOTHER, AND I – PREPARE IT FOR THE TABLE:

First, scrub the ham with a stiff brush in lukewarm water to remove mold — a harmless but telling sign of its age. Then, have your butcher cut the hock into several pieces. Use these for seasoning pots of cabbage, beans, etc. Take out five or six thin center cuts — a quarter inch. With the center cuts removed, the whole ham (an optimum size of 22-25 pounds) will now be in halves of 8-10 pounds each. Wrap one for the freezer and the other is your delicacy de jour.

Soak the ham half overnight in cold water with a cup of vinegar added.

Then, remove the ham, rinse it off, and place it fat side up in a large pot. Cover with fresh water, bring to a low boil and simmer for about an hour. Remove and rinse again. Fill the pot with fresh water fortified with two cups of apple juice and a cup of sugar and cook just below the boiling point, uncovered, for about three hours or 20 minutes per pound. Then, turn off the heat and let the ham cool in the water for about two hours.

You're almost there! Remove it from the pot, trim off the hard skin and some of the fat, debone it (if possible) and place it on a serving platter. Next, mix equal parts of brown sugar and bread crumbs — about a cup of each. Add a generous portion of black pepper and gently pat this spicy-sweet topping all over the warm ham. Later, when the ham is cool, thin slices of it will combine a layer of the topping, a ribbon of fat and a portion of the rich red meat.

Wars have been fought for less.