

## Cooking Salt Cured Hams

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### Soaking Ham before Cooking

Soaking a salt cured country ham before cooking is believed to make the ham less salty. This is debatable as very little water will enter the ham so the capacity to pull salt from any depth within a ham is limited. The older the ham, the denser the muscle so less salt will be removed from a longer aged ham. A ham aged 6 months or more and known by premium brand names (Smithfield Ham, etc.), has a stronger flavor and contains less moisture. Moisture is lost during the aging process. Lower moisture content increases muscle density and thus the ham is harder to carve. Experienced ham consumers generally prefer the taste of aged hams over the milder taste of a country ham.

A ham aged less than 3 months, contains more moisture, will be easier to carve, and have a milder taste.

For either type of cured ham, **the main factor determining salty taste is the thickness of the slice** regardless of the length of soaking. The thicker the slice, the saltier the taste.

**Soaking procedure:** Remove wrapping from ham. Place ham in sink or container and cover with cool water. Soak 4 – 8 hours for country hams, up to 24 hours for older, aged hams. Use a stiff brush to remove mold. Change water if desired after 10 hours.

**Do not throw away a ham with a heavy mold cover – it has not spoiled!** The mold is harmless and similar to mold on cheese. Simple scrub the mold off. Any mold left in crevasses is destroyed during cooking.

### Cooking Methods:

There are many recipes for cooking salt cured hams. Directions for the Water Method differ little. However, in the Baking Method, various sources recommend different cooking temperatures and cooking times. In general lower cooking temperatures require longer cooking times. Recommended final temperature of the ham is 150 – 160 degrees (center of thickest muscle). I prefer a final temperature of 150 – 155 degrees F. Regardless of the cooking method, the cooking temperature should not be too high and the final temperature of the ham should not exceed 155 degrees F. Otherwise the ham is stringy and difficult to carve into thin slices. When done remove ham from vessel and remove skin and fat.

#### **Water cooking:**

Place ham in a large cooking vessel, skin side down. Cover ham with water. Bring water temperature to 180 – 185 degrees F. Cook at this temperature for 20 – 25 minutes per pound until temperature at center of largest muscle is 150 – 155 degrees F. Use a thermometer to periodically check water temperature to maintain 180 – 185 degrees F. **Do not** bring water to boiling point during cooking. Add hot water as needed. Cover pot while cooking.

### **Baking method:**

There are two popular methods for baking a country ham. Each recommends placing the ham in a tightly closed cooking vessel or wrapped loosely in aluminum foil (form a tent at top) – seal tightly. Most recommend adding 4 cups water, favorite soft drink, or apple juice. Add an extra cup of liquid if roasting pan is not tight. If using aluminum foil, place ham in baking pan for support, deep enough to collect liquid that may leak from a tear in the foil.

1. Place ham in covered roasting pan or loose foil tent, skin side up. Add 4 – 5 cups liquid and seal tightly. Oven temperature 300 degrees for 20 – 25 minutes per pound.
2. Wrap ham in loose Aluminum foil tent. Add liquid before tightly sealing. Heat oven to 500 degrees before inserting ham. Cook for 15 minutes and turn off heat. After 3 hours bring heat back to 500 degrees for 15 minutes. Turn off heat and leave ham in oven for 6 – 8 hours or overnight. Do not open oven door anytime during the cooking process.

One source recommends preparing ham as above, then placing ham in a cold oven. Bring oven temperature to 400 degrees F for 20 minutes. Turn off oven for 3 hours. Reheat oven to 400 degrees F for 20 minutes. Turn off heat and leave in oven for 6 – 8 hours or overnight. Do not open oven door during cooking process.

Final temperature of the ham is not checked in baking method #2.

### **After Cooking:**

After cooking ham, remove from cooking vessel. Let cool approximately 20 minutes before removing skin and fat. For easier slicing, hams should be deboned while warm and tightly bound by cloth strips (see deboning a cured ham) or use a meat press.

Whether or not a ham is left bone-in or deboned, it should cool a few hours before wrapping and placing in a refrigerator. Ham should refrigerate overnight before carving. It is difficult to thinly slice a hot or warm ham so complete cooling is recommended. If ham will not be carved for a while, place a damp paper towel around ham before wrapping and placing in refrigerator.

Thinly sliced ham enhances flavor, reduces salty taste and is desirable when serving ham slices or ham biscuits. Thicker ham slices are usually used for pan frying - excellent for breakfast.

Very sharp knives are required to thinly slice a country ham. Sharpening knives and thinly carving a ham requires time – **neither should be rushed!** For example, if you are serving a large amount of ham for a dinner party, carving should begin 1 – 2 hours or more before serving. Sliced ham dries out when exposed to air. To prevent drying before serving, slightly moisten (sprinkle with water) sliced ham and tightly cover.

Wrap sliced ham first in plastic wrap, then aluminum foil. Water should be sprinkled on ham every time a package is opened and closed. This prevents drying when in the refrigerator.

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