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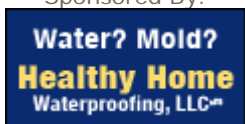
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by Mary Ann Castronovo Fusco/For The Star-Ledger

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Parma hams are seen at the "Pio Tosini" Parma ham storehouse, in Parma, Italy.

When you're expecting a crowd at the last minute and don't know what to cook, the best solution may be not to cook at all. Just think "ham for the holidays," and opt for the exquisite air-cured European varieties readily found in specialty and gourmet shops as well as in many supermarkets

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Light-years removed from the humble ham that's used to stuff a workaday sandwich, they include the prosciutto of Parma and San Daniele del Friuli of Italy, the jamon Serrano and Iberico of Spain, and the speck of the Alto Adige in northeastern Italy. Sliced paper thin, artistically plated, and presented with a complement of crudites or blanched vegetables, fresh or dried fruits, and assorted crackers, olives and cheeses, these hams are a classy and satisfying solution to a harried host's entertainment dilemma.

But which to choose?

"Most people want Parma," said Ronald Lasofsky, a senior sales consultant with Harry Wils & Co. of Secaucus, which supplies specialty foods to restaurants and hotels. "Some young American chefs are using speck -- they want to be the first ones to try something new."

"A lot of people are asking for prosciutto lately," said David Cafasso of Cafasso's Fairway Market in Fort Lee. "But Serrano must have been mentioned in a lot of recipes. People are asking for it specifically." He favors Italy's San Daniele prosciutto, however. "The sweet-saltiness is perfectly balanced in that particular product," he said.

Most of these dry-aged hams fall into the \$18 to \$24 per pound range, with Iberico -- billed as the most costly ham in the world -- going for three times as much. Top-of-the-line jamon Iberico de bellota is made from free-range pigs that are at least 75 percent Black Iberian (popularly known as pata negra, or black hoof) and that feed exclusively on acorns (bellota is Spanish for acorn). There are other Iberico hams from pigs that are fed a combination of grain and acorn or only grain, however, so it is important for consumers to be aware of what they're purchasing.

Serrano hams tend to be drier than Italian prosciuttos because of Spain's warmer drying conditions, explained Tony Grande, chef-owner of Il Capriccio in Whippany and owner of La Famiglia Gourmet in Mendham, which sells various Italian hams as well as jamon Iberico. "The producer has a lot to do with the quality of the product," he added. "Every time they go to a store, customers should ask 'What brand do you use?' because there is a difference." Some prosciuttos are cured for 12 months; Grande believes the best are cured for 16 to 24 months. "When you eat a prosciutto, it has to feel like velvet, not raw meat," he said.

Similarly, not all specks are equal. Of the 100 Italian speck producers, only 27 are allowed to carry the Speck Alto Adige IGP (protected geographical indication) designation and only two have USDA approval to export their product to the United States. Whereas the German word speck typically refers to smoked meat made from pork belly, the speck of Italy's Alto Adige -- which is also known as the South Tyrol and was part of the Austrian Empire until 1919 -- is from the leg and blends the Northern European tradition of preserving meat by smoking with the Mediterranean tradition of air-curing, explained Franz J. Mittertutzner, an administrator with the Speck Alto Adige Consortium in Bolzano, Italy. Salted and then seasoned with a formula of herbs and spices that varies from producer to producer, speck Alto Adige is smoked with nonresinous woods, such as beechwood and apple, instead of the resinous pine used to produce Black Forest and Westphalian hams, he added.

Regardless of how these hams are produced, "when you open a great one, there's a sweet aroma that comes off the ham," said Michael Haimowitz,

serves San Daniele prosciutto from Italy -- not to be confused with domestic or Canadian brands with a similar name. "I had the opportunity to see how it's made and the care that goes behind it. It's incredible to me how all that goes into it is salt -- and time," he said. "It's pink, creamy, very silky on the palate."

Antonio Mora, executive chef at Avenue in Long Branch, similarly became captivated by Serrano ham 10 years ago, during a visit to the Aragon region of Spain with his father. "Everywhere we drove there were these huge -- they looked like telephone poles -- hanging hams," he recalled. He occasionally serves a baked roulade of blanched asparagus that's rolled in Serrano ham and strudel leaves and coated in crumbled manchego cheese. "I like the flavor of it. It's a little more subtle to me than the prosciutto. And I do like that it's drier; it doesn't seem as oily."

At Fascino in Montclair, executive chef Ryan DePersio faithfully uses only a 24-month-aged prosciutto di Parma to embellish his romaine salad with ricotta salata, chicken saltimbocca and raw sea scallops. "The texture is so buttery," he said.

Those who know dry-cured hams best realize that they derive much of their distinctive flavor and mouth feel from the fat that rims and streaks the meat. Retailers, however, often are asked to remove the fat encircling the leg before slicing. Though Cafasso said he has tried to convince customers otherwise, he accommodates such requests by carefully beveling the layer of fat that edges the portion to be cut. Cesare Casella, dean of Italian studies at the International Culinary Center in New York and co-owner of Salumeria Rosi, a Manhattan store and cafe showcasing Italian cured pork products, is not as cooperative. "I'm sorry; I refuse, because it's not the way to eat prosciutto," he said. "It's a question of education. The quality of the prosciutto depends on the fat. The fat is part of the experience."

Traditionally savored in much the same way as a Spanish jamon or Italian prosciutto, speck also complements eggs in make-ahead breakfast casseroles that are ideal for late-morning breakfast and brunch gatherings, said Barbara Seelig-Brown of Lafayette, author of "Stress-Free Cooking" and a spokeswoman for speck Alto Adige. But in authentic South Tyrolean fashion, sliced speck is served at room temperature with horseradish, pickles, and plenty of crusty bread and wine. What could be easier than that?

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