



Legendary legs

— a story of Italian traditions and prosciutto ham

Italians take their food very seriously indeed, not least their beloved prosciutto ham, traditionally enjoyed all over the country as an antipasto starter.

TEXT: KIKI DEERE | PHOTOS: CONSORZIO DEL PROSCIUTTO DI SAN DANIELE

With its low levels of fat and high levels of good mono-unsaturated fats, as well as zinc, phosphorus and potassium, prosciutto is, in fact, like much of the traditional Mediterranean diet – a healthy snack.

So where does the best ham come from? Some of Italy's finest comes from San Daniele

del Friuli – a pretty hilltop town tucked away in the north-eastern region of Friuli Venezia Giulia, an area most tourists would be hard pushed to pinpoint on a map (let alone successfully pronounce its name).

The Romans and the Celts

Recognisable by its guitar-like shape, 'prosciutto di san Daniele' is made exclusively

from Italian pigs born and bred in ten regions of central and northern Italy, whose diet is a specially regulated blend of all-natural grains and whey. Meat can only be cured with pure sea salt, strictly without the use of chemicals or preservatives.

The unique microclimate of the region is key to producing 'prosciutto di San Daniele'. Southward-blowing fronts from the Alps meet the air currents of the Atlantic, while both the area's moraine soil and the waters of the Tagliamento River regulate humidity and temperature.

The word prosciutto comes from the Latin 'pro' (before) and 'exsuctus' (to suck out), referring to the process of extracting excess moisture from the meat. As the origins of the name suggest, prosciutto-making is an ancient tradition, although it originated in Friuli Venezia Giulia long before the Romans arrived. The Celts, who once inhabited the region, bred pigs and were familiar with salting as a means of preservation.

They developed a process of curing meats that was handed down to the Romans, who would later inhabit the nearby town of Aquileia, the Roman Empire's third city. For centuries, the inhabitants of San Daniele traded hams with Aquileia and the Republic of Venice, a major maritime power that dominated trade in the Mediterranean.

Perfect Preparation

Once the legs of pork reach the town of San Daniele, they are coated in a special layer of salt called 'prosciuttifici'. During

the salting process, local experts gently press on the muscle mass so that the salt sinks deeply into the meat, after which the thighs are placed in cellars for roughly one day per kilogramme of weight. The legs are then rinsed in lukewarm water, creating a change in temperature that triggers the maturing process – a stage which takes a minimum of 13 months. In order to soften the ham and prevent it from drying out, the surface of the joint is smeared with a paste made of lard and rice. Experts test every leg of ham by pricking it with a horse-bone needle and smelling the aroma to assess how well the meat has matured.

The result of this long and painstaking process is a rosy-red prosciutto with a sweet delicate flavour, characterised by a strong, mouth-watering aroma featuring gentle notes of dried fruit and barley. Its brilliant white fatty contours lend it a marbled appearance that gives the meat a rich tender flavour. Best enjoyed with a slice of freshly baked bread or a





breadstick, 'prosciutto di San Daniele' has a tender, melt-in-your-mouth texture.

Crudo Celebration

So important is prosciutto in people's everyday lives in the region, that in late June every year, the Aria di Festa Festival celebrates the long history of prosciutto, raising awareness of age-old traditions and the complex techniques that lie behind making this prized antipasto.

Crowds take to the streets to sample local hams from a variety of producers, with music, dancing, talks, cultural events and free tastings aplenty, complete with white wine pairings featuring local 'vino'. Locals come from far and wide to get involved in slicing masterclasses and cooking courses with renowned chefs, learning the characteristics of the area's much-loved prosciutto, with top tips on how best to preserve the meat.

