



Iberian hams hang to dry and cure at the Jamónes Eíriz farm and ham processing facility in southwestern Spain. | ROBIN AND ARLENE KARPAN

## Tourists can ham it up in this part of southwestern Spain



Free-ranging black Iberian pigs consume almost exclusively acorns from the region's many oak trees during acorn-producing season, but they also forage for olives that have fallen from trees, grass and anything else they find on the forest floor.

### TALES FROM THE ROAD



ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN

Europe is famous for its cured hams, such as prosciutto from Italy or serrano from parts of Spain.

But for serious ham aficionados, the cream of the crop is Iberian ham from southwestern Spain. And the best of the best is 100 per cent Jamón Ibérico de Bellota — ham from acorn-fed Iberian pigs.

Ham isn't simply ham, but the complexities were put into perspective during our visit to Jamónes Eíriz, a farm and ham processing facility in Huelva province in Spain's southwestern corner. Here

visitors can tour the entire operation from pig to plate.

In the family for 200 years, the operation is now run by Domingo Eíriz and his brother Gerardo. The tightly regulated industry has stringent conditions that must be met before the products can be certified 100 per cent Jamón Ibérico de Bellota, which fetches the top price.

First is the breed of pigs and their living conditions. We accompanied Domingo Eíriz into the forest pasture where the pigs live. After a quick call from Eíriz, a small group of pure-bred black Iberian pigs came running to meet us. The free-ranging pigs must have a minimum of one hectare per animal.

During the acorn-producing season, the pigs consume almost exclusively acorns from the many oak trees. They also forage for olives that have fallen from trees, grass, and anything else they find on the forest floor.

At this time of year, the pigs can gain up to a kilogram per day.

When acorns aren't available, the pigs are fed grain, but just enough to maintain their weight. The goal is to have almost all of the weight gain from eating acorns, which gives the ham its distinctive flavour.

The farm doesn't raise enough pigs for the processing plant so they also obtain some from other area farms that meet the same standards.

The industry has a "denomination of origin" in much the same way as wine producers identify where the product comes from.

The Eíriz farm is in the highly rated Jabugo region. So, if the ham comes from acorn-fed purebred Iberian pigs, and is from Jabugo, it has a reputation as among the best in the world.

It's a business that requires a lot of patience. After the pigs are butchered at two years old, it's another three years before the hams are sold. We donned protective cloth-

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## Parkinson's research focuses on diabetes medication

### HEALTH CLINIC



CLARE ROWSON, MD

**Q:** Are there new treatments for Parkinson's disease? I don't have it yet, but it seems to run in my family so I have an interest in it. Perhaps I can do something now to prevent it.

**A:** Parkinson's disease is a common neurological pro-

gressive disorder that may run in some families, but this is only 10 to 15 per cent of cases. It may be a combination of genetics and environmental factors.

The disease is characterised by stiffness or "cogwheel" rigidity in the limbs and face and starts gradually. The first symptoms that may be noticed are a barely visible coarse tremor in one hand.

Also, your arms may not swing naturally when you walk or your face may lack expression. You may also notice a change in your handwriting. It may be smaller than usual.

As the disease progresses, the tremor or shake will become more widespread and more pronounced

and you may have a stiff, shuffling gait when walking. Your speech may also be affected. You may sound slurred and softer or squeakier than usual.

Both Parkinson's disease and Type 2 diabetes are age related diseases that are becoming increasingly prevalent worldwide as people generally live longer. Researchers have been looking at a possible link between the two and are also seeing whether treatments for diabetes can be repurposed to help prevent or treat Parkinson's.

Glucagon-like peptide-1 receptor agonists are of particular interest. This treatment could be useful whether or not the per-

son has diabetes or prediabetes.

If your fasting blood sugar levels are higher than normal, even if you do not suffer from diabetes, it would help to eat less sugar and carbohydrates, which turn into sugar after digestion, and maybe also lower your level of alcohol consumption.

Tai chi may also help control or slow the progression of Parkinson's disease symptoms.

A Chinese study from the Shanghai Jiao Tong University's School of Medicine in 2023 monitored the health of hundreds of Parkinson's patients for up to five years. Those who practised the exercise twice a week had fewer complications and better quality of life than those who did not.

The findings back up previous studies on the benefits of other types of exercise for those with Parkinson's.

Tai chi is a low intensity physical exercise that older people can perform to improve their flexibility and balance. It gets easier with practice.

The exercising group in the study also suffered fewer falls and had less back pain and dizziness. As well, memory and concentration problems were found to be lower than in the other group. At the same time, sleep and quality of life continuously improved.

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A meat shop in Spain sells a variety of cured hams.



ABOVE: Domingo Eiriz demonstrates how he slices Iberian ham.

BELOW: A tour of the facility ends with a ham tasting, which also features local wine.



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ing for a tour of the drying facilities where the hams, along with other products such as shoulder cuts and sausages, hang in climate-controlled curing rooms.

Some farms cross Iberian pigs with Duroc pigs, feed more grain, or have a higher density of animals. They can still produce a good quality ham but can't claim the same designations or demand as high a price.

Eiriz refers to the difference in approach as "production versus passion." They pride themselves on producing the best possible ham, and have a long list of awards to show for it. It also helps that the top quality ham can sell for more than double the lesser qualities.

Is the extra price worth it? In the tasting room after the tour, we sampled different products. There was no doubt that the 100 per cent Jamón Ibérico de Bellota stood out — dark red and heavily marbled with fat. It practically melts in your mouth, with a nutty, almost sweet taste.

Eiriz demonstrated how they carve the ham, always paper thin. A special knife is used, thin and flexible, somewhat like a fish filleting knife.

While the ham is expensive, people don't eat slabs of it but rather a few thin pieces at a time that don't add up to a lot of weight. It is often served as an appetizer, and Eiriz recommends drinking a fruity white wine with it.

We asked him about the amount


of fat and the warnings we hear about not eating too much fatty or salty food.

"During the three years of aging, it only sits in salt for seven to 10 days, then we wash it off. When we eat it there isn't a lot of salt left," he explained, adding that "fat is an absolutely essential part of the product."


Not only does the pigs' acorn diet add to the taste of the meat, but it also means they absorb oleic acid, the same fatty acid found in olive oil that has several health benefits.


A bonus was discovering that this special treat is actually good for you.

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