

Thanks to Santa I have been able to experience products from an Iowa farm that are amazing. La Quercia (the Oak) is a place you should definitely consider trying. You say it lah kwair-cha.

Here's what they say about themselves: "We make artisan cured meats or salumi--prosciutto, culaccia, coppa, speck, pancetta, guanciale, and lardo. Seeking out the best possible ingredients, produced responsibly, we craft them by hand into something that expresses our appreciation for the beauty and bounty of Iowa."

They produce some of the finest cured meats I have ever had. No doubt their Prosciutto will stop you in your tracks. The Speck is subtle but the slight smokiness lingers after you swallow.

Here's what I got – Prosciutto Green Label, Americano and Piccante, Speck Americano, Pancetta Green Label and Americana, Guanciale, and Coppa. Santa did a good job.

Let's stop for just a minute and talk about all of those meats. We don't have the space for much detail. That will have to be the subject of some other articles.

First it's the meat itself. La Quercia uses quality meat. The pigs receive no antibiotics in their lives. They eat an animal by-product free diet and receive no hormones or hormone substitutes. The green label series is organic. The Rossa series uses all Berkshire pork. You also see this called Kurobuta pork. If any of you Iron Chef fans have seen the Japanese use "black pig," that's the same thing.

Around Thanksgiving, I was lucky enough to get two slabs of Kurobuta ribs. The fat marbling was outstanding along with the flavor.

Back to the meat. Prosciutto is salt cured ham. Besides air, that's it. La Quercia's Americano version is rubbed with sea salt. The Piccante version adds a little spice – red pepper and fennel – to the rub.

Speck is also salt cured ham but it also gets a little smoke. Traditionally the meat is smoked at the beginning of the curing process. At La Quercia they smoke it at the end over apple wood. They also use no spices in the rub – just sea salt. The subtle smoke is great.

Both the Prosciutto and Speck are available in a crumbled form as well as slices and whole pieces. The crumbles are great in a sauce or omelet and just as at home as a snack. Little bites of the Speck are addictive.

Pancetta is basically un-smoked bacon. At La Quercia they produce both a flat skin-on piece and the more common rolled version. These are spiced with bay, juniper and pepper.

Coppa is perhaps best known as Capocollo or Capicollo. That's how you see on packages in our stores. What we get has been spiced with garlic and pepper. La Quercia takes a milder approach and uses smoked paprika and cocoa. The meat is from the upper part of the loin. It is fully marbled, deep in color and rich in flavor.

Guanciale (gwan-cha-leh) is made from the jowl meat. La Quercia produces a skinless version that is rich in texture. It is seasoned with rosemary. The connective tissue in this meat makes for a very silky juice or sauce when it is cooked. Unlike the pork jowls we see here, this is not smoked.

Culaccia is not as well known. It is usually called Culatello and is rather rare and expensive. This is basically boneless Prosciutto. The process uses a special part of the ham only. It is boned and tied in a bladder to age for a year or so.

Finally we have Lardo. At La Quercia it is called Iowa White. In the South we call it fat back. Lardo is much more delicately salted and cured however. Sliced paper thin and put on hot bread, it melts into pools of yumminess. It has only 40% of the saturated fat of butter. How about that?

Santa did not bring me any of these last two. But there's always next year.

Another feature for a select few is what La Quercia calls the Acorn Edition. The little piglets grown for these products are feed on acorns. This program ships to the participants over an 18-month period. Unlike the other products, some of these are fresh.

Some of the things you get are ribs, fresh sausage, tenderloin, lard and caul fat. After then the bellies, legs and loins are cured and turned into great treats you get over the next year and a half. This program

isn't cheap. But several people could go together and share the bounty.

So what can you do with all that cured pork? First you look at it and marvel at its beauty. The deep mahogany of the meat and the ivory of the fat make for a wonderful sight and even better flavor.

After that my thought was an antipasto "pig out." Slices of the Prosciutto and Speck with Fontina, olive oil and crunchy bread was the way I went. The tastes of the different spicings are interesting. Slices of the Coppa can be used too.

Properly sliced, Prosciutto will melt on your tongue from your body heat alone. The sensation is quite memorable. So is the taste.

I also made risotto using Speck and lobster. That was a fine dish. These ham slices are good with sweet fresh fruit. The salty edge makes them just right.

Of course they work in a sandwich. After all they are ham. That great Croque Monsieur is a perfect place to use these.

Then there is a carbonara sauce. The Guanciale excels here. The Pancetta is good, too. I tried them both – more than once. These two also work well with beans and soups.

These last two are cooked before using. The others are eaten raw or lightly cooked. Cooking masks the delicacy of the meat. So be careful.

If you want a great food experience, try a couple of these products from La Quercia. They will change your perception of cured pork.

You can purchase them directly at www.laquercia.us. Some Whole Foods stores carry La Quercia sliced products. The store in Mountain Brook does and some of them on Atlanta do.