



Rick Musacchio ● Staff

Murfreesboro's Bob Woods uses a 50-year-old recipe and takes almost a year to cure 16- to 18-pound hams.

50-year-old ham recipe no secret

By SAMANTHA MOORE

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MURFREESBORO — Eight hundred pean-colored shanks hang from the rafters with salty juices dripping from their stocking-covered tips.

Fresh newspapers line the floor to absorb the liquid and the glare of a naked light bulb bounces off a year's work — a room full of Tennessee country hams.

"This is the eating stage," said Bob Woods, owner of the G&W Hamery on Lytle Street, while he stands in a room full of hams ready for the frying pan.

But it has taken almost a full year, 800 fresh hams from Indiana, a lot of salt and a stint in the cooler to reach this stage.

For Woods this is also the beginning of his busy season. He'll open full time the week before Thanksgiving and work through Christmas, baking, slicing and wrapping hams all day every day, he said. Some of them — weighing 16-18 lbs. and selling for \$2.45 per pound — will be given as gifts, others are bound for holiday tables.

It has been much the same for 20 years here at this basement business, started by Woods' uncle and cousin. Each year 700-800 hams are readied for the winter rush using a 50-year-old "sugar-cure" recipe Woods is happy to share. He encourages others to cure hams, shares the

Cooking tips

Bob Woods, owner of G&W Hamery, offers these tips for selecting and cooking a good country ham.

- The ham bone should stick out. The meat shrinks with age.
 - Feel the ham. A country ham should be firm, not soft like fresh cuts of meat.
 - An extra fat covering will keep the meat inside moist but also look for a good lean section.
- To bake the ham: cut off the hock, trim fat except from the back and place in a roasting bag with a little water. Insert a cooking thermometer and remove ham when temperature reaches 170 degrees.

G&W's 411 W. Lytle St. office is open full time the week before Thanksgiving until Christmas. For more information, call Woods at 893-9712.

cooking secrets he's learned and gladly shows visitors the original recipe sent to his grandfather.

The handwritten recipe, now well-worn and framed, calls for 8 pounds of salt, 2 pounds of sugar and 3 ounces saltpeter for 100 pounds of meat.

"Before refrigeration, [curing] was the way people preserved meat," he said. "There are very few people who still do this. That [recipe is] not exactly what I use, but it's pretty close."

Woods also uses some modern technology to take part of the risk out of this business.

"I've got two walk-in coolers I use primarily when the hams come in," he said. "The coolers are mainly insurance. Nowadays the weather is so unpredictable. If you put 400 hams in there you can't take risks like that."

The hams are processed in four stages. They are salted and cooled in January, moved to a slightly warmer room where the salt moves through the ham, smoked to give them a good rich color and then hung in the aging room. Finally, almost a year old, they are ready for discriminating taste buds.

A few hams have been allowed to age two or even three years, but "when they're good it's hard to keep them three years," he said. Some customers have been coming almost since the business began, Woods said.

"We've got people who've been buying hams from us for 20 years," he said.

November and December are the busiest months, but customers buy hams throughout the year.

"I guess I'm a regular customer," said Magnolia Woods, who stopped by to get a ham last week. "I was coming before he was here. I used to get hams from Mr. [Sam] Woods and Mr. Givan."

"I always get the biggest one in the house," she said. ■