

## Epi curious



### Jenny Garing answers your culinary questions

**Q. What is the difference between prosciutto and pancetta? Can I use them interchangeably? - A customer at the Lyttelton Farmers' Market**

A There is an important difference between the two meats. The best way to think about them is that prosciutto is like ham and can be eaten raw, whereas pancetta is like bacon and should be cooked. However, that is only a rough guide or sometime rule.

Prosciutto is the generic Italian name for a hind leg of a pig that has been salted and then air-cured for a long time. The traditional Christmas ham we have here has been cooked and cured, but prosciutto crudo is air-cured and is not cooked.

There is an enormous variety of prosciutti in Italy and the subtle differences depend on the way the pig was raised, what it ate and how the meat is cured. The most famous, prosciutto di Parma, comes from the area around the city of Parma, where parmesan cheese is also made. The pigs are fed on parsnips, but also on the whey left over from the cheese-making process. This makes the flesh mild and sweet. The pigs are reared indoors and not allowed to roam, so the meat is quite fatty. Another popular prosciutto is San Daniele, which many consider superior to prosciutto di Parma. This ham comes from the northern region of Italy where the pigs are fed on acorns. The meat is leaner and darker as the pigs roam outside. You can taste the nutty acorns in its delicate flavour.

These two can be found in Christchurch shops, but it is



Different but similar: Prosciutto and pancetta hang in an Italian delicatessen.

# Prosciutto or pancetta

harder to find many other Italian prosciutti here such as the savoury Toscana prosciutto or the sweet Modena prosciutto, as only small amounts are produced.

The Spanish version (jamon serrano) is different again from Italian prosciutto as it is cured with a coating of lard. It has more flavour and significantly less salt added than prosciutto, as the air in Spain is drier and naturally saltier for the curing process. Italians and Spaniards argue over which is better.

To serve prosciutto or serrano, make sure it is sliced very thinly and serve at room temperature, allowing the intense flavours to shine. You can cook prosciutto, but do so only lightly, as it goes very crispy very quickly. Add it as a garnish to risotto or pasta dishes.

Pancetta is the Italian equivalent of our streaky bacon. Bacon here is brined or salted to

cure it, and then sometimes smoked.

Pancetta is slightly different in that the salt cure is flavoured with spices such as fennel, nutmeg, pepper and garlic. It is also then air-cured for up to four months. Commercial bacon in New Zealand is never air-cured. Pancetta is traditionally cured between two boards (pancetta testa), giving it the flat shape. You can however, also get rolled pancetta (pancetta arrotolata), which is usually not as fatty as the flat pancetta. But the fat is where all the flavour is, and as pancetta is used to flavour stews, soups and pasta it is this flavour you need.

Pancetta can be quite expensive in New Zealand, but a little goes a long way if you are using it in recipes where it is diced up and cooked as the flavour base - usually with onions and garlic forming the base. Try a

warm salad with rocket, baby spinach or watercress, dressed with fried, still-warm pancetta. The fat from the pancetta gently wilts the leaves.

Now, having said that you should think of pancetta as bacon that needs to be cooked, I have had it raw and it was sublime.

You need good quality pancetta sliced into see-through slices which you can serve wrapped around fresh figs or juicy peaches, or if you can get them, try ice-cold lychees. Or sliced raw pancetta with sliced smoked salmon.

Jenny Garing, linguist, traveller, gourmet and teacher answers Zest readers' culinary questions. She is also extending Ground Essentials food products and running cooking classes. Send questions to [jenny@ground.co.nz](mailto:jenny@ground.co.nz)

### Bone problems

Q. I like using bone-in chicken pieces, but when I do them in the crockpot, the chicken pieces get so soft, bits of bone break off and spoil the casserole. I usually remove the chicken pieces, take the meat off and return it to the crockpot, but still, bits of bone break off, and you don't see them. Can I avoid this? - Linda Young

A. I also prefer leaving the bones in chicken when I cook it as they keep the meat moist and give it more flavour. However, it is tricky to cook chicken well in a slow-cooker. Slow-cookers are ideal for red meats that have strong muscle fibres, but they are not the best appliance for chicken and other soft, white meats. Chicken meat cooks faster than red meats, so leaving it cooking for the day while you are at work is not so good. It needs to be on a medium-low temperature (160C-180C) for less than five hours. You also need some liquid to maintain a moist environment. The cooking time should be long enough to kill all bacteria and cook the meat, but not enough to dry out the bird and break bones. High and Low settings on most slow cookers are often not precise enough for cooking chicken, as there is no temperature control and the low setting can be too hot for soft meats. If you want to use your slow-cooker for chicken I suggest that the first time you do so you monitor the temperature and tenderness of the meat as it cooks. That way, the next time you will have a much better idea of the temperature setting and time required to cook it perfectly.

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