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The Historical, Cultural, and Anecdotal Importance of Iberian Ham

When I was about 14, I had the great opportunity to go on a family vacation to Spain, specifically Barcelona and Madrid. At the age of 14, not much seemed to interest me in general, with my response usually resembling a mildly enthusiastic, “cool.” This, however, interested me right off the bat, and I went into that trip excited and curious about Spanish culture. While in Barcelona though, there was one aspect that was specifically memorable to me, that being the food. I already had a slight preconception of Spain’s type of cuisine, with Tapas and Gazpacho coming to mind, but I didn’t understand Spain’s rich history of food. Upon arriving at the first restaurant of the trip, I noticed this large and discolored leg of meat hanging behind the front glass, visible to the entire street. Despite this, I had not put much thought into the display, distinguishing it as the equivalent of a butcher shop, thinking it was slightly interesting at most. Yet throughout the trip, I realized that this meat was more than just a decorative piece, as I finally got to try what they call “Jamón Ibérico,” simply known as Iberian Ham. This meat could easily be confused with other thinly sliced cured meats such as Prosciutto. Yet, after having the privilege to try it, the meat’s unique taste immediately distinguished itself from others. The history of this meat, however, is an aspect that is extremely detailed and still easily overlooked.

The history of Iberian Ham is vast, starting around the ninth century BC, where the consensus among historians is that the Phoenicians brought over a crossbreed of Mediterranean pigs and wild boars via Lebanon. During the period of Hispania in the Iberian Peninsula (consisting of Portugal and Spain), beginning in 208 BC, Roman and Spanish alike indulged in Iberian Ham, growing its popularity as time went on. As early as 45 BC, high-ranking Roman officials, such as Cicero, would publish works praising ham and pork in general as one of mother nature’s greatest offerings: “As for the pig, it can only furnish food; indeed Chrysippus actually says that its soul was given to serve as salt and keep it from putrefaction; and because this animal was fitted for the food of man, nature made it the most prolific of all her offspring” (Cicero and Rackham 277). Other Roman greats, such as philosopher Pliny the Great would publish in 77 AD that, “There is not the flesh of any other living creature that affordeth more matter for gluttony [than Jamón Ibérico]: for there are nearly fifty sorts of tastes, whereas other have but one each” (Pliny et al. 94), where Pliny praises ham for its distinctly unique taste. Ham would become a staple in both Spanish and Roman history following the end of Hispania, spanning all the way to the Spanish conquistadors of the fifteenth century, where during the conquest of the New World by Christopher Columbus, he would note that the New World had few, if any, livestock. During Columbus’ second expedition, he would record bringing eight pigs from the Iberian Peninsula to the New World (Zadik). This importation of pigs would lead to a new breed of pigs belonging to North America and would kickstart the massive United States pork industry we know today.

To hear the United States pork industry started from Europe is not surprising with any prior knowledge of the Columbian exchange, yet it is easy to see the irony where the United States isolated their pork industry from other European countries, including Spain. Starting in the 1990s, the USDA would pass import laws on the importation of Iberian Ham, noting that Iberian Ham’s dry aging was not up to the health standards of U.S. facilities. This was an aspect during

my experience in Barcelona that was fascinating: the fact that these restaurants can leave food hanging for days on end. This differs from curing in North America, where such simplistic approaches would be quickly shut down. The USDA would state that the import laws facing Jamón Ibérico were out of concern for the spread of African Swine Fever, a disease innocuous to humans but could possibly be spread to pig populations. Despite efforts to eradicate African Swine Fever from cured meats by the Spanish government, the USDA would not be satisfied until late 2009, finally lifting some of the import laws facing Jamón Ibérico. During this period of import laws, however, the U.S. and Canada would create trading agreements in order to protect North American pork industries if there were to be an outbreak of African Swine fever (USDA), which are still being followed to this day. As the restrictions on Jamón Ibérico eased in the U.S., the availability would only increase slightly compared to prior years. The price of the ham would stay very similar to the price before the lifted restrictions, likely due to the lack of import companies created during this long period of import laws.

The impact that these restrictions had on both the United States and Spain was large, as the tastes of the two cultures would be separated. This separation would isolate Iberian ham only to Spain and surrounding regions, leaving many to guess what this Spanish relic would taste like. The taste of Iberian ham is one that I find hard to describe, best finding myself reverting back to the words of Pliny: “for there are nearly fifty sorts of tastes.” The iconic savory and nutty taste of Iberian ham can root itself to the way Iberian pigs are raised, allowed to roam the Spanish forests and exclusively feed on acorns. This would differ from other cured meats more accessible around the world, such as prosciutto, having a sweet and salty taste to it. The unique taste of Iberian Ham is reflected throughout the ancient scholars’ writing mentioned prior, further showing the important role that this meat plays in the development of Spanish food culture. This distinctiveness to their cuisine is portrayed as a point of pride throughout Spain, as they flaunt their large legs of Iberian pig through shop windows as mentioned prior. The old nature of this dish in Spanish history continues to be reflected in much of Spain’s old-world dining experiences, where small families open up restaurants in their hometown, not with the sole intention of gaining wealth, but rather to express Spanish tradition and how Spaniards continue to honor their traditions with pride.

With Jamón Ibérico being a historic dish in Spain’s history, the dish grew around Europe as people migrated across the continent. As mentioned previously, during the period of Hispania, Roman rule allowed Iberian ham to travel with the Roman Empire. The presence of Jamón Ibérico would travel across Europe, and it is still exported to countries such as France and Germany (Consorcio Serrano). The importing of Iberian Ham in France seems to fit their cuisine better than other European countries, with one of France’s specialties being charcuterie. Even so, the appreciation of this meat does not remain true as it does in Spain, as the history and culture do not exist outside Spain. In addition, the other regions that import this meat often prioritize domestic dishes that hold relevance in their region. As Spain continued to recognize this meat as a Spanish delicacy following the U.S. banning its import, its interest across Europe remained, yet over the Atlantic, it would be forgotten by many.

Not by me, however, with almost six years passing since the first time I had tried Iberian Ham. I have not yet forgotten this great dish. From my first experience sitting down in an old-world restaurant in Barcelona to trying my first bite of this meat, it was clear this memory would live with me for a while. It is not just the taste though, as the experience alone, such as the leg hanging in the window, and the lore of this meat being “banned” in the United States only further

intrigued me as a kid. Taking these memories back with me to the U.S., I told all my friends about this amazing ham I tried in Spain, where the most common response is along the lines of, “What is so special about it,” and that was a question that I had to ask myself throughout this project. Sure, the ham tastes good, and we get it that comes off the leg of a pig, but what about this meat should people be interested in? As I wrote this project on Jamón Ibérico, I realized that the true importance of this ham is its history in Spain and the often-forgotten impact this meat has had. From being enjoyed by Roman officials ruling Spain to conquistadors introducing the meat to the New World just to kickstart the American Pork industry, this shows the impact that this ham has had throughout its two thousand-plus tenure. Yet the most important aspect is the respect it is given by the Spanish. The people of Spain do not see this as a normal food item but as a piece of their history and culture. Spanish citizens take this ham with pride and honor the traditions of their ancestors, not giving into stricter regulations just to export Jamón Ibérico further. Looking at how Iberian ham has progressed in popularity and influence shows how its importance should not be judged on just its taste, but the lasting impact it has had on Spanish history and culture.

Understanding that the ham is not just loved among the Spanish due to its taste, but mainly its historical and cultural impact helps us to understand the separation that both pork industries have tried to maintain over recent years. Moves such as banning the import of Jamón Ibérico to the United States can be described as a way to keep both industries’ identities separate. Spain considering Jamón Ibérico a homegrown tradition could justify Spain’s lack of interest to fight the import restrictions, and with the United States looking to reinforce American industry, the move is not surprising. These import laws enraged many Americans and Spanish alike, yet this move could be interpreted to further reinforce the cultural importance of Jamón Ibérico in Spain. I will never forget my experience in Spain, as it was one of my favorite trips I have ever taken before, yet reflecting on Iberian Ham made me crave it once more. Even so, my newly acquired understanding of the importance of this dish made me understand one thing: this is Spain’s dish. So, to fully appreciate the dish that I have just raved about, I must wait until I am where the dish is originally intended: in Spain.

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