



## FEATURE

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# Ham for the holidays: the challenge of choosing wisely

A taste test for expensive jamón highlights the importance of asking the right research question, say **Katharine Wallis** and **Nicholas Zwar**

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*Jamón can be expensive  
Depending on the taste  
But if a man can't tell the difference  
It's just a bloody waste  
\*  
Jamón can be delicious  
But it isn't just the taste  
Those pigs are walking olive trees  
And better for your waist*

Overindulgence at Christmas can blow both the budget and the waistline. Ham—though not to everyone's taste or not in accordance with all personal, cultural, or religious beliefs—is often on the menu. It can be delicious, but cured meat intake is a risk factor for cancer, several chronic diseases, all cause mortality, and even mania. Choosing wisely and enjoying in moderation may be important.

## Spanish obsession

In Spain, ham (or rather, jamón) is a national obsession. Jamón consumption dates back at least as far as the Roman empire. After Moorish occupation ended in the 15th century, eating pork found a special place in the hearts of Spanish people and was seen as a symbol of religious and political independence.

Traditionally at the time of the matanza (literally, “sacrifice”) in the early winter, family pigs were slaughtered and the hams cured with salt and air dried. Today there are several varieties of jamón based on the type of pig, diet, and regional origin. The best known varieties are jamón serrano, made from the familiar white pig raised mostly on cereal grains, and the prized jamón ibérico, which comes from the long legged, black hoofed, indigenous Iberian pig—descendants of pigs that ran wild on the Iberian Peninsula.

Arguably the world's finest ham is jamón 100% ibérico de bellota, made from the purebred Iberian pigs that roam free on

the ancient rangeland in southwest Spain, feasting on acorns (bellota), wild grasses, and herbs. The acorns give the ham a special nutty flavour and the fat a rich, creamy texture that is close to melting point at room temperature. Jamón ibérico de bellota is cured in Andalusian salt for several weeks, rinsed, and hung up to dry in the mountain air for as long as 48 months. Much of the fat from these acorn fed pigs is monounsaturated and high in oleic acid, earning the pigs the nickname “walking olive trees.” Only virgin olive oil has a higher monounsaturated oleic fatty acid content. The ham also has less salt than other hams, as the marbled fat and higher pH levels of the meat prevent the salt from penetrating.

## Price variation

In Barcelona, the place to buy jamón is the famous Boqueria food market. Built on the site of the former Saint Joseph's convent on La Rambla, the Boqueria was opened on Saint Joseph's day (19 March) in 1840. While negotiating the bustle of local shoppers and tourists in the Boqueria we noticed the wide variation in prices for jamón ibérico, ranging from under €20/kg (£18; \$22.75) to over €200/kg for the jamón 100% ibérico de bellota.

A question began to form in our minds that matured over lunch and a cerveza (or two). Was it worth spending our hard earned money on the premium product? To maximise enjoyment, did we—with taste buds developed in the antipodes—have to buy the more expensive jamón? No doubt this is a question that has occurred to many a ham fancier and one you may be contemplating as you set out to buy your own Christmas ham. Like true scientists, we decided that it could be reliably answered only by an experiment.

## Taste test

We conducted a taste test in a manner akin to a blind wine tasting. We bought two 100 g samples of jamón ibérico of different cost from the same stall at the Boqueria market, sliced

by the same vendor with the same jamonero knife. Under pleasantly controlled conditions—a shady tree in the hotel garden—we divided the sliced jamón into roughly equal bite sized segments and took turns at blind tasting two trials of 10 samples each, while the other tossed a coin and administered the jamón sample: heads for the more expensive sample, tails for the less expensive. Between each test a sip of water was administered to cleanse the palate. Rioja was also available on request. (We acknowledge that this limitation of our study may have influenced our senses, but this was jamón tasting in Spain, after all.)

Results from our taste test suggest that expensive jamón may be wasted on Antipodeans. In the combined results we correctly identified only about a third of the samples (13/40; 33%). We reliably recognised neither the more expensive jamón (6/19; 32%) nor the less expensive (7/21; 33%). However, the combined results hide important gender based variation. The female taster was wrong most of the time (4/20; 20%), consistently assuming that her preferred jamón was the more expensive ham. The male taster was correct more often (9/20; 45%) but was completely random in his responses. In short, he had no idea.

Further discussion over dinner and Rioja led us back to the research question and the realisation that our experiment was fundamentally flawed. You cannot taste money. The decision on whether it's worth paying extra for more expensive jamón

is at least a two step process. Firstly, one needs to have tasted both more and less expensive types of jamón and be able to recognise the difference; secondly, one needs to prefer the more expensive jamón. Clearly, prior experience is needed.

### Less is more

Despite our flawed research question and limitations in the methods we think it safe to conclude that jamón is delicious and may be enjoyed in moderation, even by those with an undiscerning palate and a small budget. More expensive jamón may be better for you, but jamón is not something to be consumed for its health benefits. Eat it for its flavour and texture and, in the interests of longevity and a healthy bottom line, limit consumption.

When it comes to ham at Christmas, choosing wisely is important, and less is more. Further work is needed to test the hypothesis that jamón appreciation develops with exposure. Field trips to Spain may be necessary.

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