

A Question of PRESTIGE

Gourmets love it. Restaurateurs rave about it. Cured ham from the free-range, acorn-fed Ibérico pig has always been appreciated in Spain. But now it is making its mark around the world and one firm stands out for the quality of its product. It is located in the west of the country where pastures dotted with oak trees stretch to the horizon.



TEXT
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PHOTOS
JOSELITO

Travel to Spain's western provinces and you find a land of rolling grasslands and big skies. Centuries ago this majestic but unyielding terrain produced the *conquistadores*, desperate adventurers from Extremadura who traveled to the New World in search of fame and fortune. Today this region bordering Portugal has its own source of wealth—one which attracts the interest of gourmets worldwide. An army of pigs roams over endless pastures, gorging on the abundant acorns from the thousands of oak trees. From these animals comes an important Spanish export: succulent hams and an array of other pork products. A certain mystique has grown around Spanish cured ham and, among the cognoscenti, the town of Guijuelo in Salamanca province (Castile-Leon) has acquired a reputation for producing the finest examples. In fact, while the hams are cured here, the pigs are to be found largely in the Extremadura region. Of all the ham producers, none enjoys greater prestige than the family firm of Joselito, which exports its products to 48 countries and now has China and the United States in its sights. Hams from Joselito, among the most expensive on the market, have won acclaim from leading chefs. According to Basque maestro Juan Mari Arzak and Carme Rusalleda (her restaurant near Barcelona and one in Tokyo boast a total of five Michelin stars, *Spain Gourmetour* No. 74), Joselito's is "the best ham in the world."

More than raising pigs

On a recent visit to Guijuelo, Robert Parker, considered the most influential



wine critic, praised Joselito's hams as "Spain's greatest culinary treasure and one of the world's finest natural products." As for the renowned Ferran Adrià, he says: "Joselito is my life." So what is the secret of this success? Astute marketing is undoubtedly part of the answer. But there is more to it, as a visit to the company's headquarters reveals. At first sight, Guijuelo (population 6,000) is an unremarkable sort of place. But, thanks to its flourishing business in pork products, it is one of Spain's most prosperous communities, with relatively few unemployed. There may be an economic crisis in other parts of Spain, but not here. At 1,000 m (3,280 ft) above sea level, the town enjoys an ideal climate for curing pork: chilly in winter, hot in summer. There are many curing sheds (*secaderos*), but that of Joselito surely has the most impressive entrance—an imposing ultra-modern façade of steel, glass and timber. Step inside and you discover that there is a good deal more to the ham business than merely raising pigs and hanging up raw meat to cure for a few months.

Presiding over Joselito is Juan José Gómez, the fourth generation of a family which started the business in the late 19th century. José's sophisticated palate has developed over the 30 years he has worked in the family business; he started at the age of 15. And there is no more enthusiastic promoter of his product. "The taste of our ham is something special," he asserts. "It lasts for maybe two hours and it is different from other gourmet foods. I like caviar but I tire of it, and the same goes for truffles. But I never tire of ham." While his brother Juan Luis concentrates on administering the breeding and rearing of the company's many herds of pigs, José is an indefatigable global traveler as he expounds the qualities of his firm's products. "We've invented nothing," insists José. "The curing methods come from the time of the Romans. We follow a long tradition, but until recently nobody investigated exactly why one ham turned out better than another. Now we have a laboratory staff who analyze our products and methods so that we can improve in all areas."

Nature and research

Joselito's *cerdos ibéricos de bellota* roam over more than 100,000 ha (247,105 acres) of *dehesas* (Heart of oak, page 50), much of it the company's property and the rest rented, in the Extremadura and Andalusia regions, Salamanca province and Portugal. As part of a 30-year reforestation plan, every year the company plants 70 to 80 thousand trees, mostly holm oaks (*Quercus ilex*) and cork oaks (*Quercus suber*). The company's efforts were rewarded this year with a management certificate from



the Forest Stewardship Council (FCC), a non-governmental organization promoting responsible forest management worldwide. It is the first time a business of this type has been selected anywhere in the world. A key aspect in producing quality hams is the animals' freedom to roam. Each pig forages for food and water over 2 to 4 ha (4.9 to 9.8 acres) of pasture. This keeps them in shape, which contributes to the particular texture of their flesh. During *la montanera*, the months between October and February, each pig eats about 15 kg (33 lb) of acorns a day. When the two-year-old pigs weigh about 180 kg (396 lb), 40,000 or so are transported to Guijuelo to be slaughtered. The hams are stored in sea salt for a week or so, then washed and hung in the *secaderos*, with immaculately maintained, carefully ventilated chambers. In summer heat, the hams sweat and the outer fat melts and penetrates the muscular fibers, a process vital in making the meat tender and aromatic. For further maturing the hams are stored in dark *bodegas* at temperatures between 14 and 18°C (57.2 and 64.4°F) and humidity between 60 and 80%. More than 400,000 hams, from the years 2004 to 2011, hang in Joselito's installations. Hams from the *paleta*, or shoulder, are cured for a minimum of two years, and hind-leg hams, known as the Gran Reserva, for at least three years. A select number, vintage hams known as the Colección Premium, are matured for more than 82 months. Most of these hams are pre-sold and, according to José

Gómez, demand exceeds supply. During the curing process, an expert *jamonero* checks quality by thrusting a bone probe (the *cala*) into the flesh and then sniffing it. Experience is highly valued among Joselito's 50 employees at Guijuelo. Many have decades of service, and when 29 shared in a 41-million-euro win on Spain's national lottery four years ago, most of them chose not to retire, but to continue working for the company. The succulent meat in Joselito's hams is purple-red and marbled with veins of pinkish fat. It is, claims the firm, a healthy product, containing oleic acid, vitamins and natural antioxidants which help reduce cholesterol and the risk of arteriosclerosis. Joselito backs this up with the results of scientific surveys, and points out that 100 g (3.5 oz) of their ham contains fewer calories than a plateful of rice of the same weight. To improve quality, a staff of 15 in Joselito's research and development department analyzes everything, from the pig's diet to the final product. Authentic hams from the acorn-fed pigs are clearly identified with numbered labels. Clients order their hams at least two years in advance. Most of those maturing in Guijuelo bear labels indicating they are already sold to gourmet shops and top restaurants, a system of advance purchase found only in premium products like vintage wine. While the final product is not quite worth its weight in gold, it is highly

valued by gourmets—and they are willing to pay for it. A Gran Reserva ham weighing 8 kg (17.6 lb) sells for around 560 euros in the gourmet department of El Corte Inglés (Spain's leading department store).

Headed for premium markets

Every year the company markets some well-aged hams in designer packages for its Colección Premium. Last year 55 hams of this special edition sold for 2,500 euros each. The boxes containing the hams, designed by the Moneo Brock Studio, were works of art which could be converted into elegant lamps. At a charity auction in Poland last year, a seven-year-old Joselito ham in a Moneo box went for no less than 23,000 euros. Joselito also markets pork loin and various varieties of pork sausage, *chorizo*, *salchichón* and *longaniza* (spiced with pepper, salt and garlic), all from free-range Ibérico pigs and naturally cured. Around 20% of Joselito's production is exported and for much of the year director José Gómez is on the road, working with a marketing team. The company uses seminars and tastings to spread the word and it collaborates with Dom Pérignon, presenting ham as the perfect accompaniment to champagne. But personal contact is all-important and José has forged links with leading restaurants and gourmet shops, including Harrods and Fortnum & Mason in London, KaDeWe in Berlin and Hédiard in Paris. Among the leading restaurants



serving Joselito hams are Cracco Peck in Milan, L'Atelier de Joel Robuchon in Paris, Carme Ruscalleda in Tokyo, Akelarre in San Sebastián and La Viña del Ensanche in Bilbao. Traditionally, Europe has been the strongest export market. Britain is the longest entrenched, but Germany, Italy, France, and Scandinavia are not far behind and Asia, Australia and Latin America are increasing in importance. Recently Russia has entered the scene. "They've given our product a great welcome and we're very pleased with our progress there," says the company.

Joselito is preparing to export to the US, a particularly tough challenge. American aficionados love Spanish ham but only small quantities reach the US market and it is little known among the American public at large. The first hurdle, acquiring official sanction to import Spanish pork, requires the Guijuelo installations to be inspected so that they can be certified as up to US health standards. This should be no problem for Joselito, but the greater obstacle is making Spanish ham as familiar to American consumers as Italy's prosciutto.

The Italian ham is as well-established in the US as Italian olive oil, so it's a question of raising awareness. "The Italian lobby is very strong in the US, but we are working to market our product there," says José.

Then there is China, potentially the biggest market of all. An estimated 100 million Chinese consumers have a high level of purchasing power, and by 2015 up to 300 million may be as affluent as the average European. But, as José Gómez knows, the new

superpower presents special difficulties. "We have already been checked out by their health inspectors and shown our products there," he says. "Our hams are appreciated by many of the elite. The Chinese like small snacks similar to *tapas* (bite-sized portions) and they like pork. Being able to buy and consume a product like our best ham is a question of prestige. "I have visited China seven times and will be going again this year. It's going to be a task of 15 to 20 years to make our hams widely known. But first we have to be sure to appoint the right importer and distributor." Spain exports annually around 20,000 tons (40 million lb) of cured leg and shoulder hams, from all breeds, representing sales worth more than 170 million euros. Only 10% of Spanish cured ham comes from the Ibérico breed, but it is this product which sets the standard and reinforces the country's prestige in foreign markets. In the words of Ferran Adrià: "Hams like those of Joselito are the standard bearer of a sector which the whole world can enjoy."

David Baird, born in England, has worked on newspapers and magazines in the UK and around the world, including Canada, Australia and Hong Kong. Since the 1970s he has been based in Spain and has covered the country, in words and pictures, for a variety of international media. Twice winner of Spain's national award for foreign travel writers, he has also written a number of books, fact and fiction.

Cárnicas Joselito

- **Founded:** late 19th century
- **Workforce:** 50
- **Sales 2010 (estimated):** 60 million euros
- **Export quota:** approximately 20%
- **Main foreign markets:** Australia, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Scandinavia and the United Kingdom.
- **Products:**
 - Joselito Gran Reserva Ham, cured for a minimum of 36 months.
 - Joselito Gran Reserva Paleta (ham from the front leg) with a minimum curation of 24 months.
 - Joselito Loin, smoked in natural coal and wood ovens and cured in natural drying rooms for 5-6 months.
 - Joselito Chorizo, produced with premium cuts of meat, cured for 6 months in natural drying rooms and cellars.
 - Joselito Salchichón, produced with premium cuts of meat, cured for a minimum of 6 months in natural drying rooms and cellars.
- **Website:** www.joselito.com (English, Italian, Japanese, Russian, and Spanish)
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