

BY FRANCINE MAROUKIAN

# The Best Bacon In America

...probably isn't sold in your supermarket. Thank God for mail order.

IF YOU'RE TALKING TO ME, you can't just claim to love bacon. I need to believe that you love it for all the right reasons: the saltiness that keeps you thirsty no matter how much you drink, the smokiness on your fingertips that leaves you smelling like someone in a Walker Evans photograph, that penetrating aroma of warm fat hanging in the air like a shroud. As far as I'm concerned, there is no such thing as bad bacon—even the supermarket swine that Brother Raab is willing to devour with pho sauce will more than do. But there is such a thing as better bacon (called boutique or artisanal bacon), and I'm here to tell you what that is—and where to find it.

Unlike factory-made bacon, mass-produced to please our homogenized national palate, boutique bacons made at smaller smokehouses are crafted to very specific, very individualized styles, with distinct flavorings, regional characteristics, and varying degrees of salt and smoke. In the Northeast, maple syrup is used as a cure ingredient; in the South, brown sugar. Boutique bacons can be smoked over hickory wood in some states and corncobs in others. "All I know is that no two slices look alike," says Dan Philips, founder of America's first and only bacon-of-the-month club. (See "Captain Bacon," page 139.) "They're like fingerprints."

Then there's shrinkage. When the bacon conglomerates, geared toward supplying every supermarket in America, speed up the smoking process by using shortcuts like liquid smoke, well, you know what happens: You start out with a pan full of promise and end up with crispy shards of twisted meat. Boutique bacon won't disappear in your pan, because it's been smoked over real wood long enough (and at a temperature high enough) to render much of the fat from the bacon while it's still in the smokehouse. It's also sliced thick enough to sink your teeth into. "We grew up in the country," says Khoury Mubarek of Nodine's Smokehouse in Torrington, Connecticut. "We don't think you should be able to read a newspaper through a slice of our bacon."

For most of us, though, boutique bacon is once-in-a-while bacon, not because of how we live but where we live. Without national distributors—which very few small smokehouses have—locally made bacons are most-

ly confined to their own little corner of the country. Some specialty-food shops, like Citarella in New York City and Zingerman's in Ann Arbor, Michigan, care enough to bring in selections from regional smokehouses. You can also try the better butcher shops in your area.

And if even that fails, you've still got mail order and the Internet. Many smokehouses will ship straight to you (see list above), but I'll warn you: It's not cheap. With shipping costs, you're looking at around ten dollars a pound, and that's sometimes with a five- or six-pound minimum. Still, what's sixty bucks for a freezerful of our country's finest pig? Boutique bacon is incredibly versatile: It can stand alone, be used as a top-notch ingredient, or lend its rendered fat to some of the best cooking you'll ever do. Going out of your way to find it is not about being a snob or fetishizing an everyday grocery-store purchase. Sure, it might be about taste, but it's also about value. You *will* pay more for a pound of boutique bacon, but so do its producers. And if they don't mind, why should you?

## Smokehouses

1. Ham I Am!, Dallas (800-742-6426; hamiam.com): Ozark Trails pepper bacon

### [retailers]

ZINGERMAN'S, ANN ARBOR, MICHIGAN,  
888-636-8162; ZINGERMANS.COM  
CITARELLA, NEW YORK,  
212-874-0383; CITARELLA.COM