

Hormel Foods - Our Food Journey™ Podcast
Episode 2 - The Rise of Charcuterie

Evan Inada: Every once in a while you'd hear a loud noise up on top floor, and what he would do is—he liked his salami as hard as possible—so he would pull it out of his drawer every once in a while and bang it against the desk, and if it wasn't hard enough to his liking he would just toss it right back in the desk and wait for another couple weeks.

Ethan Watters: Welcome to Our Food Journey™, a podcast by Hormel Foods. On this podcast we feature conversations with all sorts of influencers and tastemakers in our food system. For the last few years, charcuterie has been one of the top trends in America, and no charcuterie board is complete without a selection of fine, cured Italian meats. But what makes a great charcuterie platter? Should you slice your salami thick or thin? Should you eat the skin? These are all topics that chef Ron got to cover with Evan Inada, the marketing manager of Columbus Foods. We hope you enjoy the conversation.

Ron DeSantis: This is going to be a conversation true to my heart, because I am a sucker for great salami. I really enjoy it. Salumi, prosciuttos, anything like that. Evan, welcome, I'm looking forward to chatting with you, I really really am.

Evan: Yes, thank you for having me. Can't go wrong with any salami, really. We make a lot, so...

Ron: Well, you can go wrong with salami.

Evan: That is true.

Ron: Maybe not yours.

Evan: That is true. If you make it the right way, it's tough to go wrong. It really is an art. There's a lot of art and science involved in salami, in making it the right way. So that's really what we've focused on over the last hundred-plus years with Columbus, so it's been a fun time.

Ron: So, a hundred years.

Evan: Yes, it started in 1917 in North Beach in Little Italy in San Francisco, California. The reason we started over there was just because the climate is very similar to Italy. One of our original owners, Mr. Domenici, he was a travelling salumiere master, and he would travel from town to town learning all these different recipes across the whole country, and when he moved to San Francisco he found that the climate was extremely similar. So in the morning time they would open up the windows in our North Beach facility and let the fog creep in to really just get the temperature acclimation perfect to about the 68 degree temperature we need.

Ron: So is most, is a lot of the salami still made here?

Evan: Yeah, all the salami that is made for Columbus is still made in the San Francisco Bay Area. So we have about, roughly about 2.2 million pounds just dry curing as we speak in our facility. All different kinds.

Ron: That is—

Evan: You've got to come by.

Ron: I mean, when you walk in, it's just got to be overwhelming, the aromas.

Evan: Yeah, it's like a little nice aromatic blanket you could just wrap yourself in and take a nap in there. It's a fun time.

Ron: Oh, gosh... So that's where your meats are cured. Are they processed there? Are they made into salami there as well?

Evan: Yes, so everything from shipping in the pork shoulder through our doors over there, we break down everything and we do all the mixing there and stuffing of the salamis, and then all of our salamis have a drip dry room for about seven days and after that, once the fiore or the penicillium mold forms on the outside, we put it into different sections depending on the salami and it ages anywhere from between 21 to 95 days. It's all in there, so it all depends on the diameter.

Ron: So 21 to 95 days. Is 95 the days the oldest salami, or are there older?

Evan: For us 95 days is the oldest salami that we make. It's finocchiona salami, so real traditional Tuscany style salami. We're using fresh garlic, wild fennel. We're using hand trimmed antibiotic-free pork shoulder, along with the sherry wine and other ingredients. While we're dry curing it we put it in a natural casing where it just really gets that beautiful, beautiful flavor after 92 days.

Ron: So there's so many questions I want to ask right now, I don't know which one to jump into. Remind me to ask you about the white on the salami. But the other part of it is, I love really hard salamis. I look for that and when you cut them they're just so intense in flavor and I love the texture of what they have. And that happens in those 92 days?

Evan: So that happens as the whole curing process progresses. Really the harder the salami, the longer it's aged. As long as it's still in the natural casings that they're in, it just continues to just get harder, so four five months later it tastes even better than it did the first month. And our old owner actually, every once in a while you'd hear a loud noise up on top floor, and what he would do is—he liked his salami as hard as possible—so he would pull it out of his drawer every once in a while and bang it against the desk, and if it wasn't hard enough to his liking he would just toss it right back in the desk and wait for another couple weeks. You'd hear that loud noise every once in a while.

Ron: That's great. So, you know, you see the salamis and there's this white on the outside. Do I peel it off? Do I eat it? What is with that?

Evan: You know, it all depends. For us, the white, what it is, it's a penicillium mold. So it's very similar to brie cheese in a sense where the mold—we call it fiore because it's a little sexier and it's not as intimidating to the customers, but it's really just a casing that helps the curing process begin—it really cuts off all the air to the product so then the fermentation process begins inside. A lot of times we do peel off the fiore, depending on the casing, but if we're using a natural-casing salami, like a smaller one, like our salame secchi or our cacciatore salamis it's completely edible, the casing with the white on it. It actually is a beautiful kind of contrast in textures and flavors in there.

Ron: Oh, okay. Alright. Do you have a prosciutto-like—?

Evan: We do. We do have a prosciutto that we use for retail and we also wrap our prosciutto with mozzarella in a little snacking product of ours called panino. A lot of different uses. We also have a couple other whole-muscle meats that we use. My favorite is the culpa. It's a hand-trimmed pork shoulder that we cure like a prosciutto. It actually used to be known as the “poor man's prosciutto,” just because they're taking the less expensive cut but still doing that same curing process, but nowadays it's roughly around the same price, so it's not the poor man's version anymore, but just great great flavor.

Ron: I was going to ask, innovation-wise, I'm old school and I'm thinking that salami doesn't want to be innovated on. It's been around for a long time and those traditional ones, there's something special about them. But I guess there is room for innovation, and if you start looking globally there are some flavors from around the globe that are suitable and can be brought into this. Is there a salami you made that when you were done with it you guys were like “this is terrible”?

Evan: You know, we've crashed and burned once and twice over the years.

Ron: We should be! If we're not pushing it, we're not...

Evan: There's always trial and error with everything.

Ron: Exactly.

Evan: We've tried a few different things on flavors that just didn't end up mixing well. We've tried curing with beer other times and seeing how that works. We want to perfect it first before we release it to the public, but we're getting there. Everything takes trial and error.

Ron: But you have one with wine, right? That works.

Evan: Yes. All of ours start off with wine. So we start all of our regular line with a nice dark California red wine, so we're using burgundy wine for that. And then for our kind of upper echelon group of salamis—the artisan salamis—we're bringing in sherry wine for that. But we also are starting to look into other wines and beers and other alcohols to use in the salami curing process.

It's fun, and innovation-wise, really, I think the thing that we're trying to do now also is make the traditional, beautiful salamis that some people don't know about on a friendlier platform. So make it pre-

sliced, or make it easier to eat where you could just take a piece of salami that, sometimes, the name you wouldn't be able to pronounce or you're scared to know what's in it because of the shape and size of it, and really just cut it down so you could have it with some great cheese already set out for you that you know taste perfect together. And just really start introducing a new salami to a new group of people even though its been made for centuries.

Ron: So the idea of slicing, I like mine thin.

Evan: Yes. Thin? Yeah.

Ron: You answered my question without me asking.

Evan: Thin is the right way to do it. You got to go thin for salami, and that's really the beautiful part about it too. Some people, when they see it at the deli, they're looking at the price point on it and 20 dollars a pound for a piece of salami they're like, "wow that's really expensive," but they don't think that they're going to get that much. They don't need that much. When you slice salami the right way, which is a nice thin slice, you could get—for a large diameter salami like a finocchio—you could get about 45 slices in a half pound. So that goes a long way. And even the smaller, traditional Italian Drys, you could get about 62 slices or so—roughly in a half a pound. So you're only paying 5 dollars for that. It's actually a better deal than the regular sausages and the other things out there in the market for the amount that you're getting.

Ron: So are there only salamis, or for lack of a better word, a bologna-like line that you make?

Evan: We do have a couple cooked charcuterie items that we really focus on. We make a capicola, which is a hand-trimmed pork shoulder for us. We just slow cook that with a little bit of our red pepper and paprika to give it a little spicy kick. That's one of our favorite cook times and for bologna-wise, we actually make a mortadella, so a very traditional mortadella—the recipe comes from Bologna, Italy. So very very—

Ron: Those nice big white pieces—

Evan: Those big white pieces. Yeah, people before, they've always asked us, "is that cheese?" And no, its good fat. It's fat. And one of the things that I think a lot of the people that are starting to fall in love with salami didn't realize before is fat and the importance of fat in salami.

For us we use a better cut of fat than most other companies. We use lean back fat to make all of our salamis. That helps us get that clean mouth feel and makes the palette not greasy when you're eating too much of our product, as opposed to belly fat where its more of a grease, lard-based fat that sticks to the roof of your mouth if you eat too much of a lower-end salami made with that. For us, that back fat—just lean cut back fat—just keeps you coming back for more salami. And used with the pork shoulder, our ratio is about 80% lean hand-trimmed pork shoulder 20% lean back fat. And during the curing process we actually lose 30% of the volume so by the time the finished product comes out, its just a beautiful mixture of everything you need.

Ron: You're absolutely right. When you have really really really well done lard, you know what that means. You know exactly what that means about high quality fat and how good that can be. And you know, you're right, you don't need a lot of this. People say "I don't eat much meat," well it's like "well, yeah he eats salami and prosciutto, and..." well it's not really *meat*, you know, I'm not eating a 6 ounce, 8 ounce portion of it, I'm having a little bit, its more of a condiment for me.

Evan: It's a starter.

Ron: Just to get me going, just to make me feel like I'm getting something out of this.

Evan: It's fun, definitely.

Ron: That's really great. Evan, charcuterie has definitely been a hot trend recently. I have 2 friends that have written books—I've got 3 friends—that have written books on it, Master Chef Fritz Sonnenschmidt has written a book on it. John Kowaliski at the CIA has written a book on it. And from outside of Detroit—his name is slipping me right now—with Michael Ruhlman has also written a book on it. So I've got some friends that are really really deep into charcuterie. What's driving the trend?

Evan: You know, it's one of the hottest food trends in the last few years. If you look at really any new American restaurant, you see a charcuterie board as a starter. And its really just a fun starter for any type of food. It doesn't have to be tied to Italian food or French food. Really, for the millennial and baby boomer culture, occasions don't come just once every few months—like a big occasion like christmas or thanksgiving—anymore. People either host or attend an occasion 2.5 times on average, every single month.

So charcuterie boards are just one of those great things where you could put it on the table and not have to worry about it in prep work and other things while you're making the main courses. It's a nice plate to just really set a beautiful tone for the meal ahead. One of our original salumiere masters, or one of the ones that really brought us to the point where we're at now, Mr Franz Lovecchio, and our old owner, Mr. Pocceti, they made a salumi book as well, just talking about our salami and some great recipes, so if you ever want another—a fifth book—feel free to check that one out.

Ron: Thank you very much, really appreciate it. Evan, can you share a little bit about the new relationship with Hormel? How's that going?

Evan: You know, initially, when you're purchased by any big company you worry about like, oh man, what are they going to make us do to get the product down to the price point that their other brands are at. But for us, we were really fortunate where they bought us because they loved who we were already. They bought us for their personality and our artistic ability to really do what we do. Meat is one of those worlds where there's different tiers for different customers. And for us, we're the premium tier for everybody that wants to enjoy great quality product. So when they purchased us, they really told us to "keep doing what you're doing. You guys are doing it right, you've been doing it for a hundred years, so who are we to tell you that you're doing it wrong now, all of a sudden."

So its really a fun experience so far. They've really given us a lot of support and manpower, in helping us do what we need to do in certain instances, but in terms of the quality of the product, they've left us alone on that, let us do our thing.

Ron: That's great to hear. Evan, I really have enjoyed this conversation.

Evan: Myself as well.

Ron: When I hit San Francisco, I want to visit. As I said when I started off, I am just a sucker for salami. I love, just absolutely love, the intensity of flavor and textures, so this has been really great conversation and a lot of fun talking about so thank you very much for joining us.

Evan: No thank you, thank you for having me.

Ethan: Thank you for joining us on this episode of Our Food Journey™ podcast. For more information about Hormel Foods and our engagement with our customers and partners, please visit hormelfoods.com. And do join us again.