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## Spanish import stirs up food community

By Steve Dolinsky

October 11, 2006 - A new Spanish import is causing quite a stir in the food community -- Iberico ham. Gourmands say it's the greatest thing to hit Chicago since sliced prosciutto. There are only a few places in Chicago where you can find this coveted import.

Allowing Iberico ham into the country was a lot like granting the italians permission to send us their parmigiano-reggiano and prosciutto. It's a treasured, hand-made product that smells and tastes of a certain region, in this case, Spain's Iberian Peninsula.

It's not that often chefs get excited about new pork products, but at Cobey Foods and Catering in Old Town - where they routinely import exotic olive oils and chocolates, the latest import from Spain has caused quite a bit of excitement.

"Iberico is a generic term - it's a Spanish term - which basically refers to any dry-cured meats from the Iberian pig," said Jay Shindler, Cobey Foods and Catering. "The fact they're free-grazing, just the exercise really will lend a lot to the quality of the meat, the leanness."

The fact that the pigs eat a steady diet of acorns doesn't hurt either. The store carries three types of Iberian pork: salciccon, which is really a kind of salami flavored with black pepper; chorizo - or "choritho" as they say in Spain - seasoned with paprika and garlic; and lomo - a decadently rich dry-cured pork loin. Shindler says the best way to enjoy them is with some Spanish cheese and a little bread. While the salciccon and chorizo are more reasonably priced - around 30 bucks a pound - the lomo is three times as expensive, but still prized by connoisseurs.

"It's a dynamite pork loin; it's better than any other pork loin you'll taste in the country," said Shindler.

A few chefs in town are also getting their hands on the Iberian product. At Naha in River North, they've recently offered a giant Spanish platter on the Lounge menu featuring the chorizo, salciccon and lomo, along with Marcona almonds, manchego cheese and peppers.

At Del Toro in Wicker Park, where Spanish food is the focus, Andrew Zimmerman says having access to the Iberian pork is a revelation.

"Because of the diet of acorns that the pigs have, it also contributes a really interesting, nutty flavor to that fat and therefore to the whole ham."

"When they're at this level, it's pretty much best just to eat them by themselves."

But Zimmerman alters his salciccon presentation a bit, by plating it evenly across a rectangular plate. He then mixes a salad of tomatoes, cucumbers and croutons...tossing in a sherry vinaigrette, along with some reduced Pedro Jimenez vinegar. The salad is gently mounded over the salciccon...an American accent to a Spanish treasure.

"It's part of their national heritage, and I think it's almost, I think it's just as exciting as when prosciutto di parma was first allowed into the U.S. or when real parmiggiano reggiano first came to our country, and now we get to really experience what their food is all about," said Andrew Zimmerman, Del Toro.

The real prize is yet to come. Pretty soon, the Spaniards will be sending us the entire ham - just like the Italian prosciutto - but this version will be almost black, from that steady diet of acorns and it's aged much more than any other ham we have available in America.

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Naha

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