



Spotlight: Blazing trail to U.S. for 'caviar of Spain'

By Dale Fuchs International Herald Tribune

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LA ALBERCA, Spain Santiago Martín, a burly small-town ham producer, is an unlikely hero for the gourmet crowd.

His slaughterhouse and meat-curing plant sit amid the chilly, dry hills of western Spain, a region with at least half as many hogs as humans, far from the chic bistros of Tokyo or New York.

His travels are usually confined to routine treks to his hog farm in the oak forest near La Alberca, a village in Salamanca Province, where his father founded the family business, Embutidos Fermín, in 1956, slitting pigs' throats over a pile of leaves outside the house.

But to Spain's 2 billion, or \$2.4 billion, cured-ham industry - and the epicures who salivate over it - Martín is a trailblazer.

Last year, he began exporting his Iberian ham, made from Spain's acorn-fed black native pigs, to Japan - one of the first to do so. In September, his slaughterhouse became the first in Spain to win government approval to export to the United States, according to the Spanish Health and Agriculture Ministries.

It took him 10 years and an investment of 3 million - nearly one-third of his yearly sales - to make the grade. But after about 30 visits by Spanish health authorities, "countless phone calls" and three final inspections in the past year by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Santiago Martín, 45, is finally getting ready to ship his first lot of cured Iberian sausages this Christmas.

"At first, people thought I was crazy," Martín said in his office at the ham-curing plant, where four closed-circuit TVs flash images of the butchery and dozens of little piglet dolls clutter his desk. "Many other producers didn't really believe in exporting at all, and they thought the U.S. market was a utopia."

But the premium that the burgundy hams command abroad - especially in the United States - is enticing more producers to consider the export market. Several larger companies are trying to follow Martín's lead, investing millions in new facilities to meet strict U.S. requirements, said Miguel Ullibarri, president of Real Ibérico, a consortium of 30 producers of top-grade Iberian ham, which sells at ordinary deli counters for 78 a kilogram, or \$42.55 a pound.

One producer, Covap, has poured 31 million into a new slaughterhouse that even soothes the hogs with a warm bath and music before slaughter - an attempt to satisfy U.S. concerns for animal welfare, said its international marketing director, Abel Rodríguez, who added that he expected to receive government approval by next year.

Even the government treats ham as a matter of state. For the past decade it has set aside 30,000 a year to promote the top-grade Iberian slices abroad, flying foreign chefs in for taste tests. "It's like caviar," reads a poster showing a plate of glistening dark-red slices, printed for the state-sponsored consortium, Real Ibérico, which registered a trademark in the United States in August.

Businesses that traditionally ignored foreign markets because demand at home already gobbles up the supply of native pigs and their limited oak-tree habitat hope to turn the ham into the caviar of Spain and cash in on higher prices abroad, said Gildo Seisdedos, a food marketing professor at the Institute of Business in Madrid.

They join other specialty food producers in a belated dash for a seat at the world's dinner table - and the higher profit margins on the menu for those who find a global niche. Like Martín, the smaller wine and cheese makers, the producers of extra-virgin olive oil and even the purveyors of canned white asparagus or red peppers have begun to invest for the first time in technology, advertising and packaging geared to the tastes of foreign consumers, Seisdedos said. The food sector now spends about 1.5 billion a year on advertising or promotional events abroad, according to the Institute of Foreign Trade, known as ICEX.

Some recent buzz about Spain's creative cuisine seems to be helping their efforts. In the past five years, exports of extra- virgin olive oil have doubled, mostly to Brazil, Japan, Australia, France and the United States, according to Spain's olive oil consortium, Asoliva. The value of wine exports has grown 22 percent over all since 2000, and sales to the United States alone have jumped by 43 percent, according to the ICEX. In the same period, foreign sales of Spanish cheeses like Manchego or torta del Casar were up 52 percent.

Until now, sanitation requirements in Japan and the United States have hampered sales of cured Spanish ham. Still, the value of exports has risen 40 percent in the past five years, to 120 million, fueled by a craze in France and Germany. In 2004, Japan lifted its ban on the native Iberian variety, and sales there climbed to 1.9 million from 250,000. Mexico, Canada and Chile also recently opened their doors, but the succulent Chinese market remains off limits, officials say.

The hams take two years to cure, and so the first black-hoofed shanks swathed in fat (or sliced and vacuum-packed for the squeamish) will not reach the United States until late 2007. But one American importer, Don Harris said his Internet company, latienda.com, had a waiting list of 150 people who had put down \$199 deposits on the first batch to cross the Atlantic. He expects prices for a leg of the finest ham, jamón ibérico de bellota, to reach \$1,000, more than double the cost here.