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# Parma Says British Can't Cut It, Prized Hams Are Its Domain

*By Bob Davis Staff Reporter of The Wall Street Journal*

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PARMA, Italy -- Europe loves pigs, but the people of Parma really love them.

Roman legions stationed here carried shields ornamented with boars' heads. The entrance to a 12th-century Parma cathedral is decorated with a bas-relief of a slaughtered pig. Before being turned into Parma ham, Parma pigs feast on the milky residue of parmigiano cheese. A ham museum is in the works for nearby Langhirano.

Hog heaven for ham makers? Hardly so. Parma's *prosciuttai* worry they are falling behind.

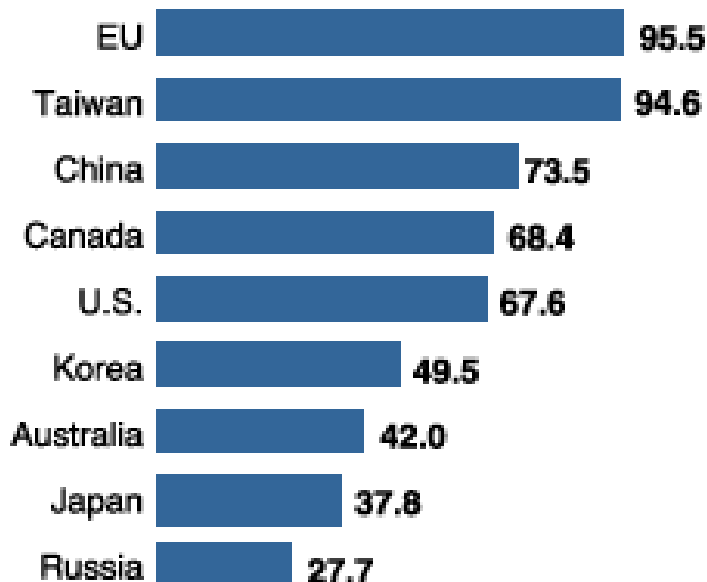
Their concern is twofold. Asda, a British supermarket chain owned by Wal-Mart Stores Inc., has begun slicing and packaging Parma ham without the permission of Parma's consortium of ham makers, hacking away at Parma's control of production and profit. "Barmy Parma Drama," headlined Britain's Independent newspaper.

More galling, a regional coalition of local ham, pasta and cheese makers has so far failed to persuade the European Union to choose Parma to house a new food-safety authority, despite Parma's culinary reputation. The favorite: Helsinki, where herring passes for cuisine.

"The Finns don't even know what prosciutto is," complained Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi late last year, when he temporarily blocked the Finnish bid.

## PORK EATERS

Per capita consumption of pork, in pounds



Note: All figures are for 2000 except for EU is 1999

Sources: EU; U.S. Department of Agriculture

Europeans eat more pork products each year than anybody else on earth -- 95.5 pounds a person. That's slightly more than Taiwanese, and about one-third more than Chinese or Americans. Kraft sells ham-flavored Philadelphia-brand cream cheese in Europe. (Don't bother looking for it in New York bagel shops.) Belgian restaurants sprinkle grated bacon on "vegetarian" salads. Italian bakers mix pork fat into pizza dough.

The European pork palate was developed centuries ago when peasants raised pigs rather than cows because pigs were cheaper to feed. As Europe prospered after World War II, shoppers sought richer foods, including buttery tasting Parma ham, whose sales have soared to nine million hams from 378,000 in 1970. The hams weigh about 20 pounds and are usually sliced in delicatessens.

That the hams are cured according to tradition adds to their allure. Parma hams are made from the hind legs of Italian-born pigs, salted by hand and dried for at least nine months in 200 production houses with long windows designed to catch Apennine mountain breezes that dry the meat. Ham makers woo skilled salters -- *maestro saltoro* -- with signing bonuses of \$2,000 and a couple of hams, worth about \$75 each.

Unlike most American hams, Parma hams aren't precooked or treated with preservatives.

But high ham prices -- a pound of Parma goes for \$9.50 at European delis and twice that in the U.S. -- and lengthy production times are also a recipe for rip-offs. Hams all over the world are labeled Parma, no matter where or how they are produced. The ham consortium sends inspectors, *vigilanze* (vigilantes in English), to deli counters across Europe. "We act like normal consumers," says Paolo Tramelli, a consortium marketing manager who sometimes doubles as a pig policeman. "If they sell a non-Parma ham as Parma, we go to the lawyers." Parma hams are branded with several marks, most notably, the outline of a crown.

In Britain, the fight is different. The EU has assigned denominations of origin to some 500 European cheeses, vegetables and meats, including Parma ham and Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese, which is also made in Parma. These products can be legally made only in their traditional home regions. But in 1997, Asda supermarkets began selling packages of "extra special Parma ham" sliced by British butchers, not Parma ones, saying that's their right.

Hogwash, replied the consortium. While it's fine for Brits to slice at deli counters because the Parma crown logo is visible, only the consortium should have the right to do industrial-style slicing. That way the consortium can guarantee packaged Parma ham is the real thing.

"The Fight to Slice" case, as the British press called it, is going badly for Parma. In April, a preliminary decision by the European Court of Justice, the EU's highest court, sided with Asda.

Nick Agarwal, an Asda spokesman, says the supermarket chain wouldn't think of selling phony ham. Anyway, he notes, Parma pigs today are actually descendants of pigs from Yorkshire, England, where Asda is headquartered. "Irony, don't you think?" he asks.

Parma has gone whole hog for the authority. It promises to give the agency a former palace as a residence. It hosts lunches for the press and European Parliament in Brussels. Says Struan Stevenson, a Scottish member of the agriculture committee: "They treat food like others treat God."

At feasts for visitors, the Parma organizers serve plates of stuffed pasta, Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese, Parma ham and another pork delicacy from Parma, called *culatello*. It too is made from the hind leg of a pig, but it's cured in humid conditions. Green

molds grow in the humidity and form on the outside of the culatello. Sliced culatello has a tangier flavor than Parma ham, and because just 10,000 or so culatelli are produced a year, they are more sought-after.

But Parma faces formidable opposition from Helsinki, which argues it deserves an EU agency because Finland is one of only two EU members without one. During an EU summit last December, so many heads of state lined up behind Finland that Mr. Berlusconi had to use his veto.

Since then, Parma has mailed a Parma ham and a wheel of Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese to Finland's prime minister. (No answer from the Finns.) It also persuaded the Italian government to schedule an EU foreign-ministry meeting this past weekend for Parma, allowing for more lobbying.

Veli-Pekka Talvela, Finland's director general of agriculture, says food hygienics should be decisive, not food taste. "We love Italian food, too, but it's irrational to argue that because they have famous food, they should win."

With the next EU leaders' summit scheduled for June 21 in Seville, Spain, the two nations seem deadlocked. So the ham makers are pursuing a separate strategy: forming a grand ham-and-cheese alliance with hometown Parmigiano-Reggiano and Comte cheese from France's Jura mountain region. The ham and two cheeses have put together a \$3 million marketing campaign in the U.S. under the slogan, "Three European Originals."

But in Parma, the alliance's greatest significance may be joint lobbying. Parma ham is fighting for the right to slice; Parmigiano-Reggiano wants the right to cut wedges. Parma ham is pressing competitors to halt using the name Parma; Parmigiano-Reggiano is preparing to take on Kraft's parmesan cheese. A European Court of Justice preliminary decision last year said that the name "Parmesan" should be reserved in Europe for Parma's cheese makers because "Parmesan" is simply French for "Parmigiano." Both mean "from Parma."

Kraft says it has changed the name of its cheese in Germany to pamsello while it waits for the final ruling, but it's still selling parmesan elsewhere in Europe. The ham consortium's Mr. Tramelli supports the local cheese makers: "It's ... a robbery."

**Write to Bob Davis at [bob.davis@wsj.com](mailto:bob.davis@wsj.com)**

