

Expert guide to cooking the perfect Christmas ham

Everyone has their own “secret” way of cooking this Christmas staple. Here five experts explain how they do it.

Australians prefer a juicy ham to a stringy old turkey at Christmas. Last year Woolworths sold 550,000 wood-smoked hams in the lead-up to the big day, compared to just 80,000 turkeys.

It’s not surprising when you consider ham is easier to cook — and for that matter harder to mess up — than the traditional Christmas bird. Plus it’s great cold, making it better for our summery Christmas weather.

Handful of prawns, couple of bread rolls, slather of aioli and some slabs of cold ham with a champagne chaser? That’s an Aussie Christmas right there. But cooking the humble ham isn’t entirely foolproof and everyone has their own way that they say works.

We asked a bunch of Australian chefs and producers for their top Christmas ham recipes and tips.

1. LUKE MANGAN, CHEF AND RESTAURATEUR

You can use picnic ham but I prefer a cooked ham leg on the bone. Look for one with unblemished skin and a bronzed glow.

I bake my ham in a 190C oven. I prefer that to the barbecue for a few reasons: It helps to retain the meat's juiciness and you have more control over the temperature. I also think Christmas hams already have a nice smokiness to it and cooking on a barbecue might overpower its natural smoky flavour.

If you think you've overcooked your ham, don't worry because you can just add more glaze on top once it's been carved. It will soak into the meat and moisten it.

LUKE'S RECIPE FOR GLAZED CHRISTMAS HAM



Score a shallow crisscross pattern in the fat of the ham and stud the middle of each crisscross with a clove then place the ham in a large roasting pan. For the glaze we use Guinness beer, maple syrup, honey and seeded mustard.

Put these ingredients into a pot and bring to the boil then pour the glaze over the ham and bake for 1 hour or until golden, basting with juices at 10-minute intervals. If juices in the pan evaporate too quickly, add a little more water. To speed things up, you can score and stud the flesh 24 hours ahead of time then cover with the removed skin. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate until ready to glaze and cook.

As the ham is already cooked, the purpose of glazing is to add your own flavour notes and to caramelize the fat. If your ham is larger or smaller, reduce or increase the cooking time until you are happy with the level of caramelisation.

LEFTOVERS

Leftover Christmas glaze is a perfect condiment for barbecues, cheddar cheese, in sandwiches or with cold meats.

Use leftover ham to make a seasonal salad, like a simple ham salad with cherries, good quality feta cheese, slivered almonds and baby rocket — a delicious combination perfect for an Aussie summer's day.

2. TERESA CUTTER aka THE HEALTHY CHEF

Being of Polish heritage I grew up on ham. Ham is the showstopper Christmas tradition that's perfect for feeding a hungry crowd and it's super easy to prepare, especially if you start off with amazing quality ham.

My family made sure to purchase amazing double smoked ham from our local Polish butcher — it was free range Berkshire ham that had a delicious rich flavour and delicate texture. We ate it with sides of homemade sauerkraut, beetroot and horseradish salad, steamed green vegetables, coleslaw and a simple potato salad made with apple cider vinaigrette and generous amounts of Dijon mustard.

TERESA'S RECIPE FOR GLAZED CHRISTMAS HAM

It's important to take the ham out of the fridge an hour before you intend to prepare and bake it, which allows it to come to room temperature and makes it easier to handle.

Start by carefully removing the rind, gently massaging the skin away from the ham, ensuring the fat is left intact.

I like to score the fat using a small paring knife in a crisscross pattern over the top to form little diamonds.

Combine ¼ cup of pure maple syrup with 2 tablespoons of Dijon mustard and 3 tablespoons apple cider vinegar then brush a little of the glaze evenly over the ham. Place on to a roasting tray lined with baking paper and pour in 2 cups of water to keep your ham moist. Bake for 1½ hours at 160°C glazing every 30 minutes. Cover with foil if the ham is getting too browned. Remove from the oven when your ham is rich, glazed and looking amazing then allow to settle for 10 minutes before devouring.

LEFTOVERS

The leftover ham hock is perfect for soups and stocks made with a mirepoix of garden vegetables and fresh herbs. I make a wonderful Ribollita (Tuscan bread soup) with ham stock, slow simmered cavolo nero, white cannellini beans and sauteed onion.

And leftover ham is perfect to pile inside a magnificent omelette with fresh tomato and a little Gruyere, or piled into large field mushrooms with ricotta and spinach for amazing mushroom pizzas. My dad also loves quiche, so I make a simple olive oil and spelt shortcrust then make the most magnificent pie made with organic free-range eggs, sliced leftover ham, spinach and spring onion. My hubby Paul also gets me to make him bubble and squeak from leftover mashed spuds and generous amounts of smashed green peas.

3. JASON ROBERSON, EXECUTIVE CHEF OF APPLEJACK HOSPITALITY GROUP

Jason's recipe for glazed Christmas ham

Ham

- 2-3kg boneless leg ham (skin on)
- 30 cloves
- 1 litre chicken stock

Glaze

- 600ml orange juice
- 250g brown sugar
- 200ml treacle
- 5 cloves
- 3 star anise
- ½ bunch thyme
- 100ml whisky
- 50ml red wine vinegar

Method

Place ham in a baking tray with a cooling rack. Pour ½ the stock into the bottom and cover the whole tray with foil.

Bake at 220c for 30mins and allow to cool.

Using a thin bladed boning knife, cut away the skin from the ham leaving as much white fat as possible.

Next score the white fat into a diamond configuration making sure to only go about 3mm deep.

Place studs of cloves into each diamond.

Place ham and remainder of chicken stock back into another roasting tray with a rack ready for glazing.

For the glaze, bring all the ingredients to the boil and reduce by ½. Strain and allow to cool to room temperature.

Pre-heat a fan forced oven to 200 degrees. Using a pastry brush gently spread the glaze over the ham.

Bake ham while continually reglazing throughout the cooking process. This will take approximately 30 mins. The ham should be brown and sticky.

TIPS

The more you baste the ham in the final process the better the glaze. Brush on a layer, allow to caramelise and repeat many times for the nice brown sticky finish.

The whisky is optional, but it's a great addition for Christmas and will lift the flavour of your ham.

4. RYAN MCBURNEY, CORPORATE CHEF OF ARCADIAN ORGANIC AND NATURAL MEAT CO.

My biggest tip? Use free-range ham. It's no secret that farming with the animals' welfare as an absolute priority translates to be the best ham you've ever experienced in terms of taste and texture. You'll never look back!

RYAN'S RECIPE FOR GLAZED CHRISTMAS HAM IN THE OVEN OR BARBECUE

In the oven

Remember you're dealing with a cooked ingredient so you only need to reheat gently and finish the look of the roasted ham

You need to remove the skin (if applicable) as it is not improved by the roasting process and results in a chewy membrane. Do this by seaming underneath the skin with a small paring knife leaving a layer of fat over the lean meat to protect it from drying out over the roasting process.

Score this fat with a cross hatch design as this will allow the basting liquid to penetrate further into the ham to achieve more flavour.

A small cake rack inside a roasting tray is ideal to suspend the ham off the base of the tray so to avoid a dry base while the tray captures any rendered liquid.

Depending on the oven and size of ham it may be necessary to position on a low shelf in the oven and use foil to protect the top surface during the early stages of reheating with an oven temperature of 140C

Only start basting the ham in the last 30mins of the cooking process. Before commencing this, put a cup of water and a cup of orange juice into the bottom of the roasting tray so as to stop the basting recipe — which has a high sugar content — from burning on the roasting tray (you will appreciate this when washing up) and also allowing the roasting juices to be used for a sauce or further application.

When basting I usually turn the oven up or use the grill function to achieve the colour and glaze that is really appealing for a centrepiece of the table.

Insert a digital thermometer into the ham close to the middle next to the bone if possible for the most accurate core temperature which you want to be at 60 degree celsius or above.

In the BBQ

It's critical that your BBQ has a lid.

Protect the base by using same tactics as you would an oven — ie a rack on a tray.

If you can't regulate the gas low enough, use fewer burners or use a metal utensil to leave the BBQ lid slightly ajar.

You may have to pour a cupful of water into the roasting tray to introduce some humidity into the BBQ.

Low and slow is the way to go. Aim for 120 degree celsius for a couple of hours then turn up the heat for the final baste

Stick to the oven process above and use a digital thermometer to check progress

RYAN'S 5 MINUTE 5-STAR HOTEL HAM GLAZE

Ingredients:

400g cumquat jam. Other varieties that work well are apricot, marmalade or red currant but I prefer the tartness of the cumquat.

150g brown sugar which really helps develop that golden colour and is a must for presentation

2 tbsp. of wholegrain mustard

50ml apple cider vinegar

Place all ingredients into a Pyrex bowl and microwave on high for approximately 4 mins checking and stirring in 1 min intervals until a syrupy liquid is achieved. Spoon or brush this on to ham liberally every 5 mins during the last 30mins of roasting the ham.

*You can add cinnamon stick x1, star anise x 1, tsp of fennel seed and small quantity of cloves if you want an authentic Christmas taste.

5. Daniel Murphy, Executive Chef of The Louise, Barossa Valley SA

I've always loved a Christmas ham. Not only is it delicious and easy to do, it's a crowd pleaser. And who doesn't love leftover glazed ham for breakfast!

My best advice would be buy from your local butcher.

Bake the scored and clove studded ham suspended on a wire rack in a 170C oven for about an hour and a half, brushing the glaze over the ham every 10-15 minutes.

Being from the Barossa, we like a touch of tradition. So, for the glaze I like to use local honey, good quality mustard, a bit of spice, clove, cinnamon, star anise and maybe a few shots of malt whisky (because it's Christmas!). All reduced to a sweet sticky glaze with some muscovado sugar and balanced with some verjuice.

TIP

Our little family tradition is Mum would always serve the Christmas ham with big chunks of fresh watermelon.