

Dealing with half a pig

Contributed by Wellington Womble

Wellington Womble shares her experience of dealing with a half a pig:

I live in a Victorian terrace with a lot of mess. I don't have any outbuildings, larders or cellars (more's the pity) but I did manage to deal with half a pig, in an evening or two, with not a lot more than an average sized fridge and freezer and a sharp knife. This isn't really about the techniques I used (as they are all other people's tried and tested methods) but more about how I managed it without a huge farmhouse kitchen and a handy celebrity chef.

I got shamed into getting half a pig – a smallholding that I'd noticed rearing very happy looking pigs advertised Oxford Sandy and Blacks for sale. With lots of lofty principles about local food, and drawn out moaning about how hard it is to get round here, I was cornered. So I ordered one, and planned to get round to getting a mincer, slicer, cellar etc etc. They said they'd let me know a week or two or two before it was due.

Of course I didn't quite get round to it, and came home to a message on the answer phone to say that the pig would be arriving on Monday night. It was late Thursday evening, and I was away all weekend. On Monday lunch break I rattled round Sainsburys and Wilkos and picked up about 5 kilos of cooking salt and a couple of plastic containers. I'd picked up some discounted muslin earlier in the week, and everything else I did without, had in the store cupboard or acquired later.

I had previously put a lot of thought into how I wanted my pig butchered, and I recommend you consider carefully what you want from it. A little thought here (and articulated to the butcher) will make life a lot easier later. However, I wasn't entirely sure how my half pig was going to turn up – I had asked for the loin and belly to be boned out and left whole for bacon, and to include the ribs for the barbeque. The leg was coming in two joints, I knew, but they were hazy on the shoulder. I asked for the liver, back fat and trotters, but they weren't available this time. I did get the fillet to stir fry, and the shoulder in a hand joint and two spare rib joints.

I finished work a bit early, and went home and made a basic salt-water brine. I chucked it straight into my tubs (which in a stroke of genius and uncharacteristic forward planning, I had measured so they fitted into the bottom of the fridge where the salad boxes usually go. This enabled the various hams and bacons to live in the fridge for the next fortnight or so with minimal disruption.) I put chillers in mine and left them in the bath, in cold water. Anyone with a little forethought would have got salt in earlier and made up the brine the night before. It could then go straight into the fridge.

When the pig arrived, I sorted out the spare rib joints, the thick end of the belly, the fillet and the ribs and put them straight in the freezer. The hand, leg joints and the bellies got chucked in the bath to keep them cool. I sawed up the loin into three manageable bits (next time I will ask the butcher to do this). Dry cured one – in a plastic Tupperware box covered in salt with a little brown sugar added (Northern Lad's method), Dry cured a second, following Alison's three day bacon cure, and brine cured a third using Judith's brine recipe in one of the boxes. Ignored them all (except to pour off a little a water) for the next five days.

Next the ham – I followed Alison's method again for the hip end, using a mixture of salt and sugar in a carrier bag, tied in a knot and abandoned for 9 days. The other went into the basic brine in the fridge for now.

I would have liked to have had a go at sausages, but after an age trimming the meat, it was still clogging up my hand mincer, so I abandoned the whole lot to the freezer until the mincer bit on the Kenwood arrives. Next time I will get the butcher to do the mincing, and I would highly recommend you do too. I went to the pub at this point, but I would have liked to have made pate and salami instead. I picked up some beer, and made up a Wiltshire cure (from the River Cottage Cookbook) and left it to cool, and transferred the knuckle end of ham into this the following day.

On Friday (5 days later) I took out all the bacon joints and rinsed them. I fried up a few slices, and reckoned it was a bit salty for us, so I put it all in to soak in plain water in one of the big plastic tubs and left it overnight in the fridge. I took them out the following day, wrapped them in muslin and left them in fridge to air till Sunday afternoon. At this point I sliced them all up (in the bacon slicer I had ordered by express delivery from Lakeland during the week!) and froze them. If you don't mind thick slices, you can do it with a sharp knife. It's great bacon, although the difference between the different methods is minimal. Not having had time to order any saltpetre has not been a problem, and I shall probably never bother with it now. I also poured water off from Alison's ham cure, and made up and added a little more cure to it at this point.

The ham remained in the fridge till the following Friday (3 days per kilo) when I took them both out, rinsed them off and put them back into plain water to soak for 48 hours, and changed the water morning and evening. I then boiled them both in plain water for a couple of hours, left them to cool and glazed them with honey and mustard and baked for a couple of hours. They were supposed to be sliced and frozen, but only one made it as far the freezer – they were both fabulous, although I think a days soaking would be enough in future.

With the exception of the spuds getting chucked out of the fridge for a fortnight, we had minimal disruption to cure the bacon and ham – it didn't take masses of freezer space. I have yet to play with sausages, dry cured hams, or salamis, but I reckon I could manage them easily, in a pleasant Saturday morning. I plan to hang them in a chicken wire cage the woodshed, where the window is broken and it's got a bit draughty recently.

This time, I shall buy salt in bulk (not that its expensive if you can't get it) get the butcher to divide up the loin for me, and do all the mincing. I'll make up the brine in advance, and take a day off work (any excuse – its not strictly necessary!). The hams and bacon will be exactly the same (although I might do a small bit of leg to air dry) and be dealt with an hour or two in the morning. I plan to make a day of it making sausage, and some salamis, which will hang in a chicken wire cage in the windowless woodshed, to be joined by an air-drying ham later. I'll make pate, stuffing and a pork pie if I can stretch it. That might be quite time-consuming, but the meat could easily be frozen until you have time if you feel you're pushed.

Costings

Just a word about costs. I rarely save money on my forays into making it myself, but this time I think I have. I worked out we spend £10 a week on ham and bacon, because we buy organic and its pricey. The total cost of all the things I used for the pig are about £120 – that means if the ham and bacon last 12 weeks (which is about what I reckon they will) I will have broken even on it. But also got three months worth of pork joints, sausages, and a couple of extra bits and pieces like ribs and fillet, for free. Obviously this is going to depend on how much you eat of what and how often, but I've included the costs for reference.

Half Pig 95.00
Salt 5.00
Muslin 2.00
Sugar 4.00
Beer 12.00
Spices
Plastic boxes 6.00
Bacon slicer 30.00

Since I wrote this in the summer, I've helped my mum with her 2 pigs. These were much, much larger than any commercial pigs, but I learned a couple of lessons that might be useful. Definitely get the butcher to do your mincing (but make sure he's aware you don't want anything added to it). It's hard work chopping and mincing your own, and takes all the fun out of making sausages. If you don't fancy making sausages because there is a lot of kit involved, then sausage burgers are just as tasty (and more convenient, I reckon). I now make three quarters of our sausage like this anyway. You don't need skins or a filler, its not so time consuming, and the resulting sausages can be griddled so that the fat drains away. I've also made pate, dog biscuits, sausage loaf (cooked and frozen in slices for quick sandwiches) stuffing, salami and a dry cured ham. A lot of this was more time consuming, but its not at all necessary if you don't want to, or feel your circumstances won't allow it.

It's really, really worth putting a bit of thought into how you want your meat butchered. The butcher has lots of sharp knives, industrial mincers and bits of kit that I certainly don't. A little pondering over what you like to cook, and how best to divide up your pig is going to pay huge dividends when it arrives. When we asked for shoulder – in joints for roasting – we got the hugest chunk of meat that would have fed about twenty! Carving that up was a nuisance (we cut them into four in the end). So an instruction like –shoulder in roasting joints of approx 1 Kg – would have been much more useful and saved us a lot of time. A couple of hours with a book (like Hugh Fearnley – Whittingstall's – Meat –) will potentially save you hours later. The butcher may charge you a little extra for this service, so if you want to save money and only pay for basic butchery, you'll need to allow for a little more time and kit. BUT you can easily do it without much special kit, and get fantastic pork, bacon, ham, sausage, pies, pates and salamis for just a few hours in your average kitchen.

The fortnight I had my first pig, I was away both weekends, and had limited space and notice, but there was three months worth of ham, bacon and pork joints in the freezer from just a couple of hours dealing with the lot initially, and an hour or two here and there over the following couple of weeks. With a little bit of forethought, it's easy as pork pie.