



CONCERGE

NOTES FROM A MAKER

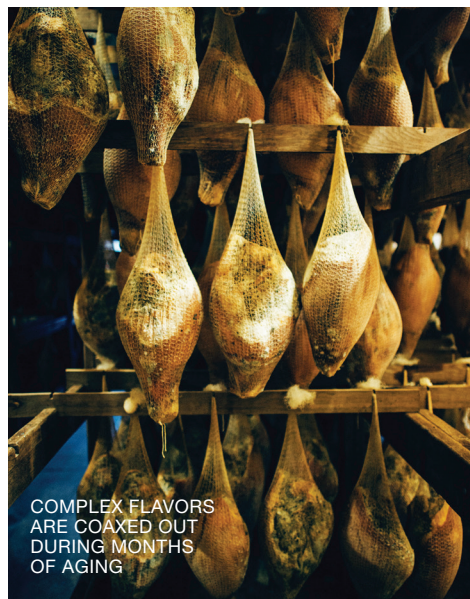
TURNER HAM HOUSE

BY CORBO ENG

It's Fried Ham Friday. Ron Turner, the owner of Fulks Run Grocery and Turner Ham House in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley, is stationed at the rear of the store. He's at a counter behind a display case, along with Howie Armstrong, one of his employees. The two men work in synchrony before a set of three electric skillets where they batter and fry up slices of Turner's sugar-cured ham. I can hear the oil pop and the meat sizzle. Once golden brown, with the edges and ridges nicely crisp, the ham is tucked into a hamburger bun and wrapped in foil. Turner and Armstrong place the larger orders into brown paper bags. Individual sandwiches, grouped in a cluster where there's available space, don't sit around for long, if at all.

Turner hands them over—one, two, three at a time—to those waiting in line. Others, in a seemingly familiar ritual, make their way toward him to holler out how many sandwiches they want or raise their fingers accordingly as an indication. Turner acknowledges their orders—usually with some friendly banter indicative of a tightly-knit small town.

Ned Overton, a local and Fried Ham Friday regular, is back again. In addition to the ham sandwiches, he likes the vacuum-packed slices, adding bits of that ham to elevate his homemade shrimp and grits.



COMPLEX FLAVORS ARE COAXED OUT DURING MONTHS OF AGING

Angie Coffman, in line for a ham sandwich too, has patronized Fulks Run Grocery since she was a little girl. While waiting, she tells me that she also buys ham bones at the store to make ham broth for ham potpie—a concoction of broth, ham pieces, potatoes, and dough (à la chicken and dumplings). It's a dish of Pennsylvania Dutch origin that's popular in this part of West Central Virginia.

For those who want a head start, Turner sells ham broth by the quart in plastic takeout containers. He also receives special orders for broth from community organizations and local churches when they prepare ham potpie at large functions. "We just did 500 quarts, three events back-to-back," Turner says. "And, sixty-nine gallons yesterday for a church."

With thousands of hams cured annually, there's no shortage of ham bones. Although Turner sells bone-in hams, he is best known for his boneless hams—proudly sugar-cured according to a recipe that was passed down from Turner's great-grandfather. Turner's hams are not to be confused with the anemic city

hams of the same designation, ones that are injected with brine, quick cured, and then formed and pressed into existence. His hams, instead, are whole and unmistakably the hind part of a hog. They're skinless, streaked with a few white bands and patches but otherwise carefully trimmed of excess fat, and have the look of a plump pre-modern football before the days of the forward pass. In Turner's estimation, his boneless ham—the store's biggest seller and the prize of his thriving mail order business—is hard to pass up. "I like frying the ham," Turner says. "It's my preferred way of fixing it."

The ham sandwiches, featuring meat with those aforementioned crispy parts, have a firm, chewy texture, and a robust flavor that boasts a tinge of sweetness from the brown sugar that's found in the cure. Peggie, Turner's wife, likes

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to prepare the boneless ham whole by cooking it first in apple cider and then finishing it in the oven. "I use a glaze of brown sugar, dijon mustard, and raspberry jam," she says. It's her contribution to the Turner tradition.

Turner's 91-year-old father, Garnett, built and opened his grocery store in Fulks Run in 1949. It was a general country store back then—offering provisions, hardware, and the



SHOPPING AT THE GROCERY

like. Turner began helping out as a little boy, sorting pop bottles and, as it turns out, presciently mixing ingredients for the cure. The elder Turner had a motto: "If you're old enough to lift a ham, you're old enough to work."

The young Turner, however, didn't immediately follow in his father's footsteps. He tried his hand at commercial photography and real estate, but neither evolved into a real life calling. Upon getting married to Peggie in 1989,



he moved back home to begin a new chapter—one where he felt the tug of history. His dad wanted out of the ham business. But Turner didn't want to see a family tradition nearly thirteen generations old come to an end.

Early on, Turner's father cured hams in the basement of the grocery store, but he soon outgrew the space. That's when, in 1966, behind the store next to a meandering fork of the Shenandoah River, he built a one-room ham house. Decades later, after multiple expansions and upgrades, that ham house is today's modern facility.

Every January, with temperatures hovering between 34 and 45 degrees, Turner begins the curing process. A big tractor-trailer pulls up to the ham house every Friday to deliver the pork, thousands of pounds at a time. Turner hams are hand-cured. The cure mix—salt, brown sugar, and saltpeter—is vigorously massaged into the meat from the hock to the butt end. Then, the hams are stacked onto eighteen-foot long shelves where they're packed together in an interlocking manner, hock-to-hock, three layers deep. The hams are re-cured after five days, then left for a period of sixty days, rinsed, inserted into net bags, and hung.

From this point onward, they take on the majestic look associated with country hams—of hind legs hanging overhead, some fourteen feet up at the highest point, suspended from oak wood racks, drying, losing moisture, and shrinking—their complex flavors coalescing

as the ambient temperature begins to rise with the passing months. The curing room develops an intoxicating aroma, something that smells like the porcine version of aged cheese, a penetrating funk that lingers satisfyingly.

By the middle of May, if the temperature has been in the seventies for a good stretch, some hams will be ready. But, depending on



GARNETT TURNER OPENED THE STORE IN 1949

demand and his own discretion, Turner will leave the hams to hang longer. Some will be left to age and mature for upward of eleven or twelve months.

"The ham we're eating today is eleven months old," Turner tells me. Seeing me nod with approval, he continues. "If you want a ham at Christmas, it's a twelve-month-old ham." It's an enticing prospect to be sure, and enough for me to be on my best behavior. Who knows? If I ask now, in ten months time, Santa may very well put a Turner ham under the tree for me.