

Ham and Ham Products

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Ham is a versatile product. It is often served for special occasions, used in sandwiches, soups and casseroles or eaten with cheese and crackers. To understand some of the basic differences among ham and ham products that are available, some fundamental knowledge about the composition of meat is needed. In general, meat contains 65 to 80 percent water, 16 to 22 percent protein and 1.5 to 13 percent fat.

Cooked ham products are classified according to the amount of protein present in the nonfat portion of the ham. Based on this classification, there are four types of cooked ham products available. The first category is a premium ham product which must contain a minimum of 20.5 percent protein. These products are labeled "ham" and are often sold as specialty products at retail shops that cater to marketing high-quality hams. Many companies offer a spiral cut ham where the ham is sliced in a circular pattern around the bone to assist consumers in serving this type of ham. In addition, these hams may have a sugar or other characteristic coating on the surface.

Ham with natural juices, another category of ham product available, must contain a minimum of 18.5 percent protein. This type of ham will be slightly juicier than a product simply labeled "ham" since it has a higher moisture content. For a good, all-purpose ham, this ham is an excellent choice. Products labeled "ham with water added" must contain a minimum of 17 percent protein. A fourth type of ham product, labeled "ham and water product-X percent of weight is added ingredients" may contain water plus binders such as soy or milk proteins to help hold the added water in the ham. Generally, as the amount of added water increases in the ham product, the result is a juicier and lower cost product.

Country or dry cured hams are primarily marketed in the southern U.S., although they may be purchased in all parts of the U.S., often through mail order companies. These hams are made by rubbing several applications of dry salt and cure on the outside surface of the ham. A carefully controlled drying process is used to cure this product so it will achieve a characteristic color, flavor and texture. These hams are typically more expensive because they are a dryer product.

Other types of specialty hams also are available. To be labeled as a "Smithfield ham," the ham must be an aged, dry cured ham made exclusively in Smithfield, Virginia. A "Virginia ham" must be processed in Virginia. If a ham is labeled as "Virginia brand ham," the city and state where the ham was processed must be identified on the label. A "Westphalian ham" is cured using a combination of a dry and pickle cure, then smoked using hardwoods to achieve a red brown or chestnut color. A large variety of ham and ham products are available to suit your taste preference and budget.