

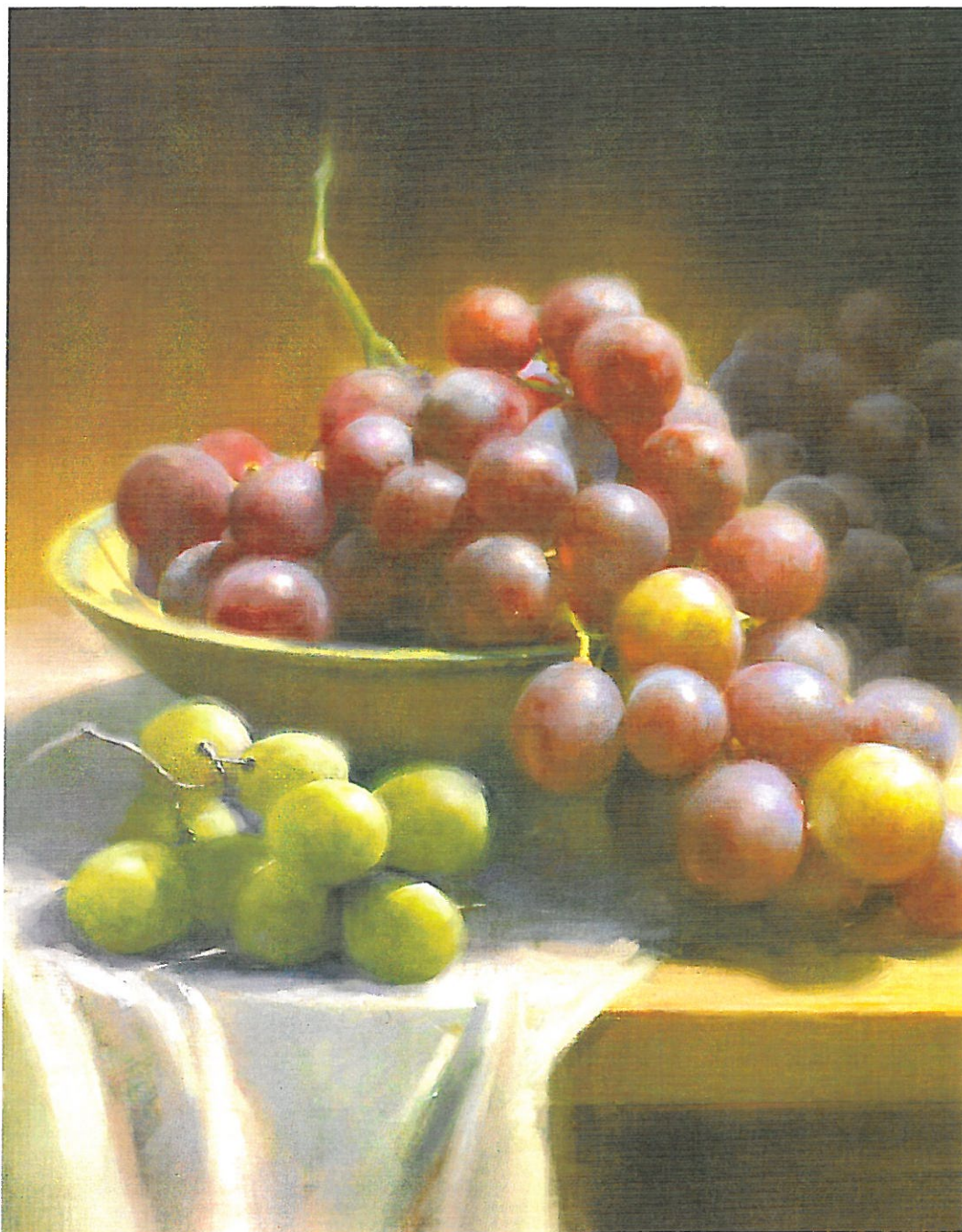
Kit
on Public Te

BER NINETY-FOUR

OCTOBER 2008

COOK'S

ILLUSTRATED



Herbed Roast
Chicken

Rating Premium
Bacon

Supermarket vs. Mail Order

Creamy Tomato Soup
Without the Cream!

Best Steak Tacos

Drip Coffee Makers
Should You Spend \$50 or \$250?

No-Roll Pizza
Thick, Extra Chewy Crust

Skillet Apple Pie
Half the Work, Twice the Flavor



Grilled Rack of Lamb
Pork Lo Mein

Glazes for Grilled Chicken
Crisp Oven-Fried Fish

Sticky Toffee Pudding Cakes

www.cooksillustrated.com

\$5.95 U.S./\$6.95 CANADA



Bringing Home Better Bacon

Artisanal bacon takes time, hand labor, and real wood smoke. But at double or even triple the cost of supermarket bacon, is it worth it?

» BY LISA McMANUS «

While there's probably no such thing as terrible bacon, we know from previous tastings that there is definitely better bacon, with mass-market supermarket strips, for example, varying a lot from producer to producer. In recent years we've been hearing about small, artisanal producers crafting premium bacon using old-fashioned curing methods and hand labor. Before you factor in shipping (most of these products are only available through mail order), premium pork can cost double or even triple the price of ordinary bacon. Could such a dramatic difference in price really be worth it?

We bought six artisanal bacons by mail order in a single style—applewood smoked—so we could sample different brands' treatment of this traditional approach that adds a mildly sweet, fruity note to familiar bacon. We then pitted these premium strips against applewood-smoked bacon from the supermarket (we found just two brands, both a cut above true mass-market bacons like Hormel or Oscar Mayer). We cooked them all to a uniform doneness and tasted them blind.

Ham-Made

American-style bacon is made from pork bellies that have been cut into slabs, cured, smoked, and sliced. But the similarity between most supermarket bacon and artisanal bacon generally ends there. Mass-produced bacon is made in a matter of hours and by machine. Artisanal bacon is made over days or even weeks, and much of the work is done by hand.

Mass-produced bacon often starts with frozen pork bellies that are thawed and tumbled in a metal drum to soften the meat, then placed on hangers and pumped full of a liquid cure solution. This solution includes curing salts such as sodium erythorbate and sodium nitrite, along with phosphates that bind the water to the cells in the meat, plumping it up (and also causing it to shrink in the pan when cooked). The meat is not actually smoked—liquid smoke and other flavorings such as sweeteners, herbs, and spices are added to the cure. After curing for a few hours, the bellies are often sprayed with more liquid smoke and heated in a thermal processing unit (often referred to as "the smokehouse") to destroy bacteria and infuse smoke flavor throughout the meat. Finally, the slab is quickly chilled, machine-pressed into a uniform shape, sliced, and packaged for sale.

By contrast, artisanal bacon takes much more time, as well as hand labor and real wood smoke. It begins with fresh pork bellies, which artisanal producers say make bacon with superior texture and flavor compared to starting with frozen bellies. While the pork is sometimes soaked in a "wet" cure, it is traditionally dry-cured, which means the meat is hand-rubbed with a dry mixture of herbs, sugars, salt, and curing salts. Artisanal producers leave the bacon to cure for anywhere from a day to a month, then slow-smoke it over wood fires, generally from one to three days, depending on the maker. The extended curing time intensifies the pork flavor and shrinks the meat so that the bacon doesn't shrivel much as it cooks. While most producers in our lineup burn real applewood sawdust or wood chips to create smoke, one burns dried apple pomace, the residue left after squeezing apples for cider.

The ingredients of the cure, the method of smoking, and the timing of each step determine each bacon's unique flavor. The age, gender, and breed of the pig and what it is fed are other factors that determine the final flavor of the bacon. For instance, most bacon producers won't use a sow that has given birth (too tough) or a male that isn't castrated (testosterone can give the meat an off-flavor) and call for a slaughter weight that is not too heavy to keep the bacon fat in proportion to the meat. In contrast to mass-produced bacon, where the pork bellies must be similar in size for machine processing, artisanal bacon has a much more irregular shape.

On the Scales

In spite of the fact that all of the bacons in our lineup were applewood-smoked or apple-flavored, they were remarkably different. Great bacon is all about a balance of sweet, smoky, salty, and meaty—and striking that flavor balance turned out to be the biggest factor for success with our tasters. In fact, tasters downgraded most of the premium mail-order brands for being too much of any one thing—too smoky, too fatty, or too sweet.

Only two of the six achieved enough of a balance to bring genuine raves. Tasters extolled Vande Rose Farms for having it all: a "nice balance of sweetness to salt, great deep complex ham flavor, very meaty." They also singled out Nodine's Smokehouse for its "hulking slices of delectable pork belly, sure to satisfy sweet and smoky fans." In addition to sharing that desirable balance of sweet, smoky, and salty flavors, both bacons provided the largest, thickest-cut slices

of the lineup (33 grams and 37 grams, respectively, compared to other slices that were as slight as 4 grams), which gave our tasters the meaty, substantial bacon texture they preferred.

The two bacons at the bottom of the heap, Niman Ranch and Nueske's, got slammed for opposite reasons. Tasters assailed the Niman Ranch strips for a lack of flavor and the Nueske's bacon for its "overwhelming smoke flavor" that was like licking an "ashtray."









But in the biggest surprise of the tasting, the next highest-rated bacons were not premium mail-order bacons at all, but our two supermarket brands. Both were a step up from the usual mass-produced bacon, straddling the gap between artisanal and more mainstream supermarket styles. Applegate Farms' Uncured Sunday Bacon is smoked over real hardwood from apple trees. While it is described as "uncured" because the company does not use sodium nitrite (the chemically produced curing salt that creates the deep red color and characteristic flavor of bacon), it is cured just as thoroughly with naturally occurring sodium nitrate from celery juice. Farmland (called Carando in the Northeast) uses its own pigs, which allows it to start the process with fresh, versus frozen, pork bellies that absorb the cure more evenly. Farmland also uses real smoke from applewood chips, not liquid smoke. While these bacons didn't receive quite the raves of the two top-ranked premium bacons, tasters praised them both for good meaty flavor and mild smokiness.

Factoring in the Premium Price

So where does that leave us? As delicious as the best premium pork can be, there's no getting around the fact that mail-order bacon is far more expensive than even higher-end supermarket bacon. Applegate Farms costs about \$11 per pound, while Farmland costs just \$6. Even after we shopped around for the best price, one 12-ounce package of Vande Rose Farms bacon set us back \$13.95 plus \$22 in shipping (second-day delivery), adding up to nearly \$36 for not even a full pound of bacon. (If you order a few pounds of bacon at the same time, you might get the total cost down to just over \$20 per pound—still well over supermarket bacon prices.) Unfortunately for most of us, such a high price tag for what's basically breakfast food is a pretty steep barrier to bringing these bacons home.

TASTING PREMIUM APPLEWOOD BACONS

Twenty *Cook's Illustrated* staffers sampled eight bacons, six mail-order artisanal brands and two higher-end brands from the supermarket, all smoked with applewood or cured with apple cider. We cooked them to a uniform doneness on a rimmed baking sheet, using our recipe for Oven-Fried Bacon (go to www.cooksillustrated.com/october for our free recipe), and rated them on saltiness, sweetness, smokiness, and meatiness, as well as overall appeal. Sodium and fat content were provided by the manufacturers. Because pork bellies are an agricultural product, some variation from package to package in flavor and in fat-to-meat ratio could be expected. To ensure that any variation was within an acceptable range, we tasted multiple batches of our two top-rated bacons months apart. A source for the winning brand appears on page 32. Based on our experience, shipping for this brand and the other mail-order bacons will cost \$20 or more.

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED	FAT/SODIUM	TESTERS' COMMENTS
<p>VANDE ROSE FARMS Artisan Dry Cured Bacon, Applewood Smoked Price: \$13.95 for 12 ounces, plus shipping Description: Dry-cured with brown sugar, salt, and pepper; hand-rubbed; applewood-smoked</p> 	<p>Size of slice: 33 g Sodium per slice: 260 mg Fat per slice: 13 g</p>	<p>Tasters raved that this bacon—which scored a distinct few notches higher than the rest of the lineup—had it all: “Nice balance of sweetness to salt, great deep complex ham flavor, very meaty,” with a “faint fruity taste, sweet and salty.” “A nice, thick cut, very hearty and substantial.” “Classic bacon, but with lots more genuine smoke flavor and in every way better.” “Now you’re talking! This has lots of sex appeal—good balance of everything.” In sum: “A winner.”</p>
RECOMMENDED	FAT/SODIUM	TESTERS' COMMENTS
<p>NODINE'S SMOKEHOUSE Apple Smoke Flavored Bacon Price: \$8 for 16 ounces, plus shipping Description: Wet-cured with brown sugar, salt, and spices; smoked over dried apple pomace and hickory or maple hardwood</p> 	<p>Size of slice: 37 g Sodium per slice: 330 mg Fat per slice: 18 g</p>	<p>“Wow, this is some huge piece of amazing bacon. Slices very wide and thick, and even the fat tastes great.” “That’s good eatin’—hulking slices of delectable pork belly, sure to satisfy sweet and smoky fans.” “Nice meatiness” and “great depth here.” “Apple flavor is subtle and it isn’t too smoky.” While it had “good pork flavor,” several tasters felt it “needs more salt.”</p>
<p>APPLEGATE FARMS Uncured Sunday Bacon Price: \$5.39 for 8 ounces Description: Wet-cured with water, sea salt, celery juice, evaporated cane juice, and lactic acid starter culture; smoked over applewood</p> 	<p>Size of slice: 7 g Sodium per slice: 145 mg Fat per slice: 2.5 g</p> <p>SUPERMARKET BEST BUY</p>	<p>One taster praised this nitrite-free supermarket brand for a “subtle smokiness, sweetness of pork, but not sugary. Woody but not overly smoky. This is log-cabin bacon.” Another noted, “You get the sense this is right off the pig; natural-tasting.” “Interesting flavor, almost like a cured sausage or ham.” Two identified it as supermarket bacon, “with its heavy salt and mild smoke,” though one taster added, “As a salt-lover, I like it.”</p>
RECOMMENDED WITH RESERVATIONS	FAT/SODIUM	TESTERS' COMMENTS
<p>FARMLAND/CARANDO Apple Cider Cured Bacon, Applewood Smoked Price: \$5.99 for 16 ounces Description: Wet-cured with water, sugar, salt, sodium phosphate, natural apple flavoring, sodium erythorbate, and sodium nitrite; smoked over applewood</p> 	<p>Size of slice: 7.5 g Sodium per slice: 125 mg Fat per slice: 3 g</p> <p>SUPERMARKET BEST BUY</p>	<p>Some found this “sugary” supermarket bacon far too sweet: “a deal breaker for me in bacon,” “like cotton candy!” Others enjoyed its “applelike flavor” and “subtle apple cider undertones,” describing it as “caramelized,” with cinnamon and maple syrup notes, “like it’s been hanging with French toast already,” as well as being “light on smoke and salt, and quite meaty. Delicious!”</p>
<p>OSCAR'S SMOKE HOUSE Applewood Smoked Bacon Price: \$9.95 for 16 ounces, plus shipping Description: Wet-cured with brown sugar and honey; applewood-smoked</p> 	<p>Size of slice: 4 g Sodium per slice: 96 mg Fat per slice: 2 g</p>	<p>A few tasters noted an “almost Asian” flavor to this bacon, describing it as like “teriyaki bacon, sweet and tangy” or “soy sauce.” Several noted a “chewy” (a few said “tough”) texture and “relatively meaty” consistency, with “good pork flavor but not really bacon-y,” according to one taster. Others found it “too sweet,” “out of balance,” and “one-dimensional” and deemed it “nothing special.”</p>
<p>NORTH COUNTRY SMOKEHOUSE Applewood Smoked Bacon Price: \$18.50 for 2 pounds, plus shipping Description: Wet-cured in maple syrup and spices; smoked and cooked for eight hours</p> 	<p>Size of slice: 12 g Sodium per slice: 350 mg Fat per slice: 3 g</p>	<p>Smoke flavor dominated, according to our tasters, and those who liked smokiness liked this bacon. “Pretty smoky, and very meaty and chewy. Thick, hearty, and fairly hamlike,” said one taster. “Delicious.” But the majority disagreed: “Wow, a lot of smoke, like barbecued bacon. Too much for me.”</p>
NOT RECOMMENDED	FAT/SODIUM	TESTERS' COMMENTS
<p>NIMAN RANCH Applewood Smoked Dry-Cured Bacon Price: \$7.98 for 12 ounces, plus shipping Description: Dry cured, smoked over applewood chips</p> 	<p>Size of slice: 15 g Sodium per slice: 140 mg Fat per slice: 7 g</p>	<p>“A fairly average piece of bacon,” “thin,” “not sweet or deeply flavorful,” “needs more sweetness.” One taster noted it “tastes like smoke, but not much else; very fatty.” Another agreed: “I felt like I was eating straight fat with no flavor. Disgusting.” A few noted a distinctly “gamy,” “funky” taste.</p>
<p>NUESKE'S Applewood Smoked Bacon Price: \$19.95 for 2 pounds, plus shipping Description: Wet-cured with salt, sugar, sodium phosphate, sodium erythorbate, and sodium nitrite for 24 hours; hung to dry for 24 hours, then applewood-smoked for 24 hours</p> 	<p>Size of slice: 9 g Sodium per slice: 180 mg Fat per slice: 3.5 g</p>	<p>Despite the company’s claims of using particularly lean hogs, our tasters found this bacon “very fatty” with “hardly any meat,” and many complained of its “overwhelming smoke flavor,” which was akin to licking a “wood-burning stove” or “ashtray.”</p>