

MAKIN' BACON... THE SKY FULL OF BACON WAY!

WHAT YOU NEED

1) A pork belly

Your best bet for finding a standard industrial pork belly at retail is to visit an Asian market; I like Golden Pacific, 5353 N. Broadway. Others buy at Peoria Packing Co., 1300 W. Lake, and I used to, but eventually I felt like their retail ones were too thin and irregular, and I could do better.

Better yet is to avoid industrial pork (an environmental nightmare with an inferior funky flavor) and buy a naturally-raised belly from a farmer. The belly will likely come from an older pig and be larger, with deep red flesh, ribbons of snow-white fat and a much superior clean flavor. Any pork seller at a farmer's market should be able to get you one, probably with a week's notice, or you can order directly online; I've bought from Northeast Iowa Specialty Meats (www.iowa-specialty-meats.com), and you can also order from Jake's Country Meats, who are here at Baconfest and sell at the Logan's Square Farmer's Market (www.jakescountrymeats.com)

2) Kosher salt

Don't use iodized; you could use sea salt, but kosher is cheaper.

3) Granulated sugar, of your choice

4) Pink salt

Sodium Nitrite, also called Prague Powder No. 1, available from The Spice House, Paulina Meat Market, and other cured meat specialty shops.

5) 2-1/2 gallon Hefty zipper bags

The largest zip-type bag available at regular grocery stores

6) Duct tape

7) A kitchen scale

8) A sharp filleting knife

9) A long carving knife

10) Some form of smoker/grill

11) Other seasonings of your choice

Be sure to keep your pork belly cold, and begin the cure as soon as possible after receiving. If it's partly frozen, you can prep it and allow it to defrost in the cure.

1. Remove the skin/rind by cutting into a corner of the belly, peeling up the edge from the fat, and slicing into it with the filleting knife, trying to cut as close to the skin as possible. Don't cut too much with any one slice, but keep working away, pulling away more and more skin as you slice further and further. Discard skin (unless you want to make chicharron).

2. Mix a basic cure by weight. Pink salt is toxic in large quantities, so it is of some importance to not screw this up and to do it accurately by weight, not by cups or tablespoons; to immediately toss any utensil that has touched the pink salt in the sink or dishwasher before someone's tempted to scoop ice cream with it; and to store it somewhere that a 4-year-old will not want to scarf down the bright pink candy sugar. (But don't freak out, it's not plutonium or something, it should just be handled with about as much care as, say, bleach.) Since it's harder to do small quantities accurately, we'll mix a larger amount than we need; it will keep for a few years, anyway, and we know you're going to want to make bacon again. The basic ratio is 8 parts kosher salt to 4 parts sugar to 1 part pink salt, so we'll mix:

4 oz. kosher salt (112 grams)

2 oz. sugar (56 grams)

1/2 oz. pink salt (14 grams)

Mix thoroughly with a spoon till evenly distributed. Makes a little under 1 cup.

3. Weigh your pork belly, then slide it into the zip bag. Take 1/4 cup of the cure mixture for a 5 lb. belly, 1/2 cup for a 10 lb. one, or something in between. Assuming you mixed the cure accurately earlier, precision is less important at this stage, as the meat itself will be regulating how much cure it absorbs. Sprinkle it on both sides of the belly, as evenly as you can; it's okay to rub it around with your hand if necessary, just wash right away. Add whatever other flavorings you want at this point— maple syrup, red chile pepper, paprika, garlic, crushed juniper berries— whatever you want! It's your bacon!

4. Zip bag shut, then duct tape securely. Lay in fridge, flat, and mostly leave alone, flipping it and swooshing its liquid around about every other day.

5. Depending on thickness of belly (the pork one, not yours), it should take about 7-10 days to slightly firm up and seem to have absorbed the cure. If in doubt, give it a couple of more days. Remove from bag, rinse the belly, and if possible, smoke it in a smoker, or off direct fire on a grill, over as low a fire as you can manage (no higher than 150F) for a couple of hours, till it has some smoky flavor and crispy edges. But don't roast till it's falling apart; it should still be raw (cured) overall. Put back in fridge to cool for a day.

6. Slicing is a pain, no doubt about it. The best way is to stick it in the freezer for 20 minutes or so to firm it up, slice a couple of dozen slices, then stick it back in the freezer. Or you can keep the belly in the fridge and slice as needed, but it won't last forever, even cured; I slice mine up all at once, then vacuum-seal portions and freeze them. Save irregular pieces for soup.

7. Fry low in a cast-iron pan for a good 1/2 hour-plus, turning as needed. Yum.

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