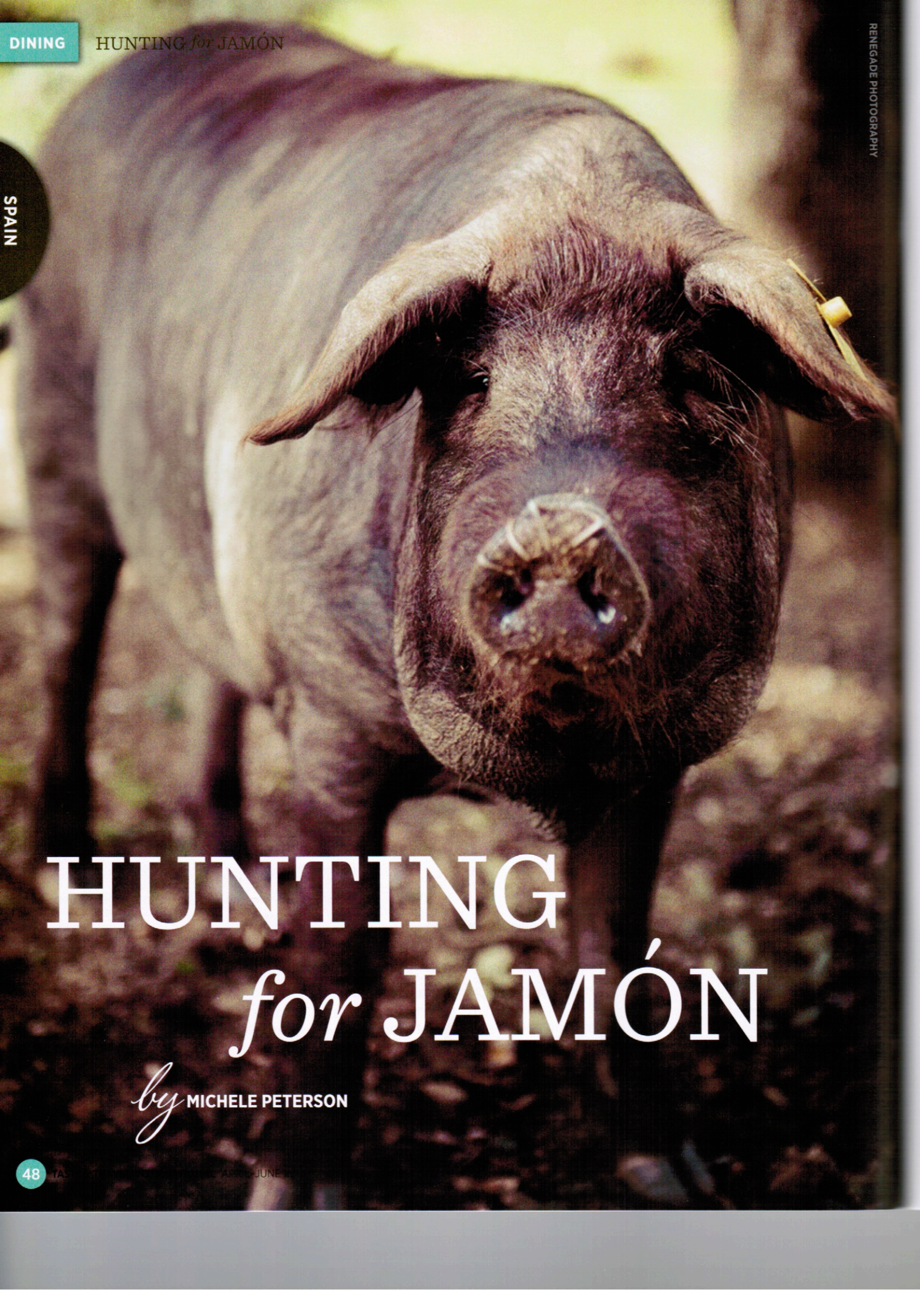


SPAIN



# HUNTING *for* JAMÓN

*by* MICHELE PETERSON

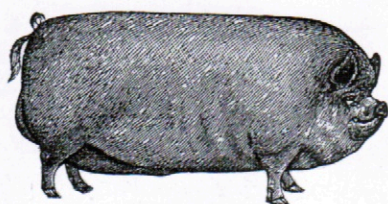


FACING PHOTO  
A Pure Iberian pig.

SPAIN



...THE ONLY FAT  
HIGHER IN OMEGA-9  
IS OLIVE OIL...



**I**'M HIKING THROUGH A FOREST OF OAK trees following a farmer who is bleating like a pied piper. Emerging from a gully is a herd of black Iberian pigs, snuffling in response. If they weren't so focused on following the swineherd, I would run for the hills. These pigs look nothing like pink-cheeked Babe of Hollywood fame.

These are the world's original swine, with a lineage dating back to the Paleolithic Stone Age period when the earliest humans decorated Spain's caves with images of wild boars. Their powerful hooves stab the earth as they devour their prized food, the Spanish *bellota* acorn, as fast as the farmer can shake them from the tree with his long wooden staff.

My experience is part of a culinary journey exploring the secrets of producing Jamón Ibérico de Bellota, one of the world's finest hams. It's a signature experience offered by Insight Vacations, a tour operator that's been designing luxury itineraries for more than 35 years. Our farm-to-plate odyssey is taking us to Jamones Eíríz, an artisanal producer located deep in the Natural Park Sierra de Aracena in southwestern Spain. Our goal is to learn the mysteries behind the ruby red wonder known as Jamón Ibérico de Bellota.

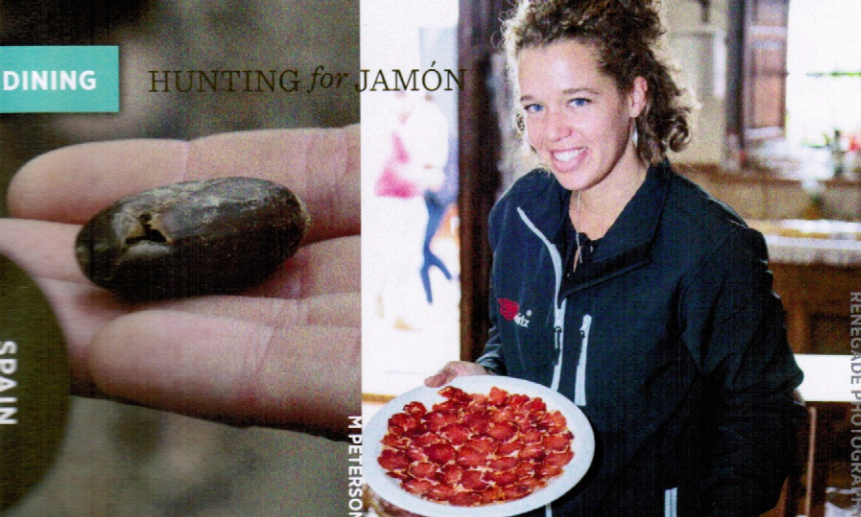
Our introduction to the legendary ham begins in a grove of oak and chestnut trees nestled in rolling hills of Spanish pasture known as the *dehesa*. Here, thick tree trunks are anchored to the ground with gnarled roots and the ground is well trodden, hammered by hundreds of hooves.

"We believe in going deeper," says John Boulding, the CEO of Insight Vacations who is accompanying our group of culinary adventurers. "Our tours focus on exploratory local experiences rather than the typical tourist track."

We're definitely going deep. I'm dodging garnet-coloured droppings the size of hockey pucks on the forest floor.

"Red dung means the pigs haven't been fed industrial feed," explains our host Domingo Eíríz. His family-owned company has been producing ham since 1842 and despite his dapper appearance he's obviously adept at navigating the slippery trails of the Spanish countryside. »





M. PETERSON

RENEGADE PHOTOGRAPHY



RENEGADE PHOTOGRAPHY

THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT  
Spanish acorn; Tasting at Eiriz; Platters of jamón for tasting; Manolo the swineherd shakes acorns to wating swine.



RENEGADE PHOTOGRAPHY

«Unlike other Iberico pigs who consume grain and other feed in typical industrial production, at Jamones Eiriz, piglets are released to roam free in the countryside at 10 months of age, feasting on food they forage such as wild mushrooms, bitter acorns and grass. But there's one food they crave.

"They love sweet acorns," explains Eiriz, "but we need them to eat bitter ones too in order to create the perfect blend of taste in the meat."

We watch as Manolo, the farmer, shakes the tree branches to release the acorns to his waiting posse of pigs. During the four months of grazing known as the Montanera, each Iberian pig has an acre to itself, devouring 10 kilograms of acorns daily.

"An acorn diet is a requirement of the Jamón Ibérico de Bellota label," adds Eiriz. And a premium price — the Bellota label can fetch double the price of regular jamón.

As we watch the pigs graze, their noble Iberian lineage is evident in their distinctive colour, more chalky blackboard than pure black, and their size. Their muscular shoulders look Olympian and their powerful black hooves or *pata negra* stab into the earth as they climb the hill with ease.

Although it's tempting to spend more time roaming the pastoral countryside, it's soon time to explore the second phase of production. Fortunately we're able to miss the *matanza* or sacrifice, a time when traditionally a Spanish family gathers to

slaughter a pig and preserve the meat.

Instead, we don lab coats, hairnets and protective booties and step



Posada Finca La Fronda  
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#### INSIGHT VACATIONS

offers several escorted journeys to regions in Iberia. The all-inclusive 13-day Iberian Elegance tour begins in Barcelona, Spain and ends in Madrid, Spain with authentic culinary events and signature experiences hosted at patisseries, family-run vineyards, food producers and restaurants in Lisbon, Granada, Seville, Sierra de Aracena, Sintra, Cordoba, Valencia, Toledo and more.  
[www.insightvacations.com](http://www.insightvacations.com)






inside the salting rooms to witness the curing of hams. Once delivered from the abattoir, the *paletas* (front legs) and the *jamones* (rear legs) are chilled and tucked in beds of dry sea salt from Cadiz, Andalucía. Then, they're hand-washed, dried and hung from the ceiling so the fresh mountain air can circulate around them. And a unique transformation begins to take place.


"Look at this fat," explains Eiriz, pointing to leg of garnet red meat marbled with glistening golden ribbons. High fat content is a good thing. Due to antioxidants in the wild acorns and the natural curing process, saturated fats are transformed into healthy monounsaturated fats high in oleic acid. The only fat higher in Omega-9 is olive oil.

Curing also creates depth of colour. Younger hams are lighter pink while those aged four years are deep red. "It's much like the aging of fine wine," says Eiriz.

We've worked up an appetite with our touring so we head to the *bodega*, the Eiriz family farmhouse where we're met by platters of lacy *jamón*. Served in paper-thin slices at room temperature at first bite, it's melt-in-your-mouth tender sweetness. Then, more complex notes begin to emerge and it becomes evident why Jamones Eiriz has garnered so many international gold awards for taste. It's heavenly and addictive. "Watch for a nutty flavour," says Eiriz as our tutored tasting progresses. "It's due to acorn-fat."

More culinary adventures await in the courtyard where a selection of aromatic Condado de Huelva wine is served. In between bites of raw milk cheeses and crusty artisanal bread, we explore other Eiriz products such as Caña de Lomo Ibérico de Bellota, a traditional cured loin dusted with paprika, garlic and salt. We learn that the ultimate ham is Jamón de Huelva, a denomination of origin verifying it's been crafted within the region of Huelva.

Each taste of handcrafted cuisine makes me feel even more connected to the land, with its ancient shale fences and graceful oak trees. Thankfully it's protected as a Biosphere Reserve. Let's hope it stays that way and that the traditional Iberian way of life continues. For Jamón Ibérico de Bellota isn't just a taste of Spanish countryside. It's a symbol of the country's proud heritage. 

**MICHELE PETERSON** is a travel writer who specializes in food, drink and sun destinations. She's based in Toronto and Mexico. Her website and blog is at [www.michelepeterson.com](http://www.michelepeterson.com) 

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SHARI SCHESKE



SERVES 6

## PORK TENDERLOIN with Porcini, Apple and Iberian Ham

*This recipe comes from Posada Finca La Fronda, a 7-room luxury boutique hotel owned by descendants of the British poet William Wordsworth and located in the Sierra de Aracena Park. If you can't get Jamón Ibérico de Bellota, you can substitute Serrano ham.*

### Cooking Apple 1

### Fresh Porcini

3 large

### Fresh Thyme

leaves from 1 sprig

### Wholegrain Dijón

Mustard 2 Tbs

### Maple Syrup 3 Tbs

### Pork Tenderloin 1

Jamón Ibérico de Bellota 50 g, diced

Salt and Pepper  
to taste

### CIDER REDUCTION

Brown Sugar 3 Tbs

### Fresh Thyme

leaves from 1 sprig

Chicken Stock 1 cup

Apple Cider 1 cup

### Garlic

2 cloves, crushed

- 1 DICE** the apple and porcini and stir-fry in a little oil until they turn golden brown. Set aside.
- 2 MIX** the thyme, the mustard and the maple syrup.
- 3 BUTTERFLY** the pork tenderloin and flatten. Apply the thyme, mustard and maple syrup paste. Place the porcini, ham and apple mixture on top. Roll and tie the tenderloin. Or pan-sear in a little oil.
- 4 COOK** the tenderloin on a medium heat grill for 5 minutes on each of the 4 sides. Or roast in a 350°F oven for 30–35 minutes.
- 5 FOR** the cider reduction, add the brown sugar to a hot pan and let it caramelize. Add the chicken stock, cider, thyme and crushed garlic and let it reduce.
- 6 TO** serve, slice the tenderloin crosswise so that you have the filling in the middle. Present on a plate and put a thin layer of the cider reduction over the top.