How to Make, Cure, and Smoke Homemade Bacon

We like bacon around here. In fact, who doesn’t like bacon? Chances are, you have bacon in your fridge right now - store-bought bacon. It’s packaged in clear plastic so that every time you open your fridge you have to look at it and think, “hmm, I could use some bacon crumbles in this salad.” Bacon has a tendency to make everything better, and let’s be honest here, bacon is great stuff. We have, however, a couple of problems with the bacon-like junk available in most grocery stores. First, few foods are more highly processed than mass produced bacon. It is usually prepared in a huge factory that is focused primarily with churning out as much bacon as possible. This means that every shortcut is taken during the processing to produce the most bacon in the shortest amount of time. Truck loads of pork bellies are shipped to a plant, where they are skinned and trimmed to a uniform shape, then “pumped” with a curing solution designed to cure the meat as rapidly as possible. They then go through a “thermal processing” (yes, that’s the technical term) then they are chilled, pressed and sliced. It all sounds very clinical, because it is. The result is a bright pink meat, that is always unpleasantly slimy when you open the package.

Follow up:

There is one main concern when curing and smoking meat, and that is botulism. While botulism is most closely related with improper canning procedures, food-borne botulism also occurs in meats that have been improperly preserved. To prevent this, commercially cured/preserved meats contain sodium nitrite, which acts both as a preservative and a color fixer. (This is what gives store-bought bacon that bright red color.) In quantity, sodium nitrite is toxic and has been linked to migraines in certain people. While that is of concern, the quantity required to be toxic would only affect someone eating Homer Simpson levels of bacon. The main concern with sodium nitrite, is that when it is exposed to high heat in the presence of protein (like a piece of meat treated with sodium nitrite being cooked), proteins in the meat bond with the sodium nitrite to produce nitrosamines. It is also possible for nitrosamines to form from sodium nitrite in highly
acidic conditions, like your stomach. Basically, the frying and eating of nitrite containing bacon presents the perfect scenario for nitrosamines to enter your system. Unlike sodium nitrite, which we know is toxic in large quantities and may make you sick if you eat too much, certain nitrosamines have been proven to be deadly carcinogens.

That sounds bad right?

The sodium nitrites are necessary in a large industrial setting, where many different individuals, machines and movements are involved to ensure that the resultant product is botulism free. The home chef can better control the variables and handling procedures, and can get those assurances without the nitrites. Oh, and your bacon will taste much, much better than anything you’ve purchased in plastic wrap, I can guarantee it.

What you will need to begin is a piece of pork belly, which you will have to get at your butcher shop. Call to see if they have any. If they don’t they will be more than happy order you one. You are going to a butcher right?

5 pounds will do nicely. Your belly should looks something like this:

Skin side down:
This layer of skin is literally the skin from the belly of the pig:

Looks a heck of a lot like bacon, right?

Thoroughly rinse and dry and then place your pork belly in a non-metal container large enough to accommodate it. My preferred curing vessel has a little tray in the bottom, which is useful because it keeps the belly out of the liquid that will be drawn out during the cure. If you have to cut it into two pieces, that’s quite alright- just make sure none of your pieces are too small. Apply salt to both sides of the belly and rub it in. Kosher salt works perfectly for this, as the
grains of a traditional table salt are too fine, while those in sea salt are too coarse. You really don’t need too much at this point, just enough to cover the belly so that it looks like this:

In this case, it was about a quarter cup. The salt will act to pull the moisture from the belly, which is all the “curing” process really is. Since dessicated or dried meat lacks the moisture necessary for the bacteria that make things rancid to thrive, the meat will “keep” much, much longer.

Now is also a good time to contemplate flavorings. Like maple flavored bacon? Lightly rub a half cup of pure maple syrup (you know, syrup that has only “pure maple syrup” as an ingredient, not that stuff sold in plastic containers) on to the belly. This is a really good time to be creative. Some molasses and mustard powder, perhaps? A more savory bacon can be made by adding a few sprigs of fresh rosemary and black peppercorns and crushed garlic to the mix. Play around a little. Developing your own cures for specific purposes can be a lot of fun. I will often halve a 5 pound belly and apply two different flavorings to the halves.

I wanted some good all-purpose maple bacon, so I added a half cup of pure dark (grade B, if you can find it) maple syrup.
Stash the container in your fridge. 24 hours later, pull them out. Your belly will look like this:

That is to say, the salt will have mostly disappeared into the meat. You will also notice that liquid is beginning to collect at the bottom of the container. Poke the belly. It should be a little firmer than when you put it in. Liquid will continue to be pulled out of the meat, which will cause the belly to become continually firmer throughout the process. Drain and discard the liquid and lightly dust the belly in additional salt (a couple of pinches should do the trick) and back in the fridge it goes.
24 hours later, and your meat will pretty much look the same as it did the day before. Liquid will again be pooled at the bottom, and the meat will be even firmer as the day before. Again, drain the liquid and lightly dust the meat with a couple of pinches of salt and return your soon-to-be bacon-y goodness to the fridge. Repeat this process so that your meat is cured at least three days. You can cure your meat pretty much as long as you’d like, just remember that you are increasing the level of salt and reducing the level of moisture each day. I’ve found that about 5 days is my ideal curing time. Your preference may vary, so experiment a little.

Once your cure is complete, remove the belly from the container and rinse completely. Now we are ready to make some bacon. If you are lucky enough to have or have access to a smoker (as I am,) this is the best part.

Here is a picture of our homemade-smoker from the front:
Smoke the bacon with hickory or walnut wood at 200 degrees until the internal temperature of the meat reaches 150. (This usually takes about 3 hours, your results may vary.) I like my bacon pretty smoky, so I keep an almost continuous stream of smoke in the box. If you like less smoke, simply wrap the bacon in aluminum foil for some of the smoking process.

If you don’t have access to a smoker, you can certainly rig one up with a ceramic pot and a hot plate, a la Alton Brown (About the 7 minute mark of this video) or you can cook the bacon in your oven. I would suggesting braising it in a foil pouch in the presence of a cup or so of liquid in a 200 degree oven until the bacon reaches the desired temperature of 150. The addition of liquid smoke to the braising liquid will give the bacon a similar smoky flavor, but it won’t be close to the results you can achieve in a smoker.
Your smoked bacon will look something like this:

Now THAT looks like bacon…

Once your bacon has cooled, it’s time to slice. A night in the fridge will firm the belly up, making it much easier to slice. We make enough bacon around here to have procured a little meat slicer for the house. As you see, it does the job quite nicely. If you don’t have a counter-top slicer hanging around, just take your sharpest knife and slice as thin or thickly as you’d like. You will notice the difference in color from what you have in your fridge. It is still red, but a much
deeper (and more natural) color and not at all “pink.” Our bacon is colored this way because we didn’t add any nitrtes, which is what provides the bright pink color.

Since no one truly needs 5 pounds of bacon in their fridge, we freeze ours. Sara has come up with a really clever and handy way to store the bacon. She lays out a long enough piece of press-and-seal to wrap each individual piece of bacon. The bacon is then “rolled up” one piece at a time.
That way we can remove as much or as little bacon as we need for a meal, roll the package back up and put it back in the freezer!

It’s easiest to roll in relatively small batches- 10 or so rashers each, so that they aren’t so unwieldy to roll and unroll. It also makes for easier storage. After we finish slicing and packaging our bacon, we have these lovely parcels to stash in the freezer!

I know it seems like a lot of effort, but it really isn’t. The total time you spend during the curing process is probably somewhere around 15 minutes over 5 days. The smoking takes roughly three
hours, but again- you’re tending to a smoker which takes minimal observation if you have a proper thermometer rig, and at the end you have (depending on your intake) a couple of months worth of bacon! Also, since fresh pork belly is a relatively cheap cut of meat, you will also see cost savings over purchasing terrible bacon for $5-$6/lb in the store and will have a vastly superior product you can custom flavor for your own personal taste.