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Issues & Ideas

What a ham!

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BARCELONA -Like much of the rest of today's world, Spain has gone off Catholicism a bit since the days of Columbus's sponsors, Isabel and Ferdinand -- dubbed the Catholic Monarchs for their fervent faith and zealous backing of the Inquisition.

A religious fervour still grips the country, however. This time, the object of worship is the pig--preferably the coveted, well-bred Iberian variety. But the truth is that any pig will do in a pinch, particularly if well-cured or stuffed into a sausage casing.

Canadians can now share in the veneration. Today marks the official launch of Spain's most venerated pork product, Iberian ham -- the first shipment having received Canadian Food Inspection Agency approval on April 8. The ham reached the United States in December, 2007, bringing prices as high as US\$1,000 per leg in the first shipment. In Canada, a higher (bellota) grade of the ham is expected to retail for \$1,500 or more per leg.

Iberian ham is revered in Spain for its delicacy and flavour, as well as the tradition in which it is steeped. Black-hoofed Iberian pigs, descended from wild boar that once roamed the peninsula, produce a singularly marbled meat that practically melts when eaten.

So-called jamon iberico de bellota -- the highest grade of Iberian ham -- obtains its nutty flavour from the acorns on which the pigs feed while they range free in mountain forests in the last months of their lives. According to common Spanish usage, the pigs aren't "slaughtered," but "sacrificed" before their flesh is salt cured and dried in darkened chambers that at times feel like primitive shrines. The religious overtones are hardly subtle.

What's being sold is not as much a product but an experience, a unique one at that. Some would even say transcendental: In our secular world, experience of pleasure or wonder has, in many ways, replaced religious faith as the most direct route to the transcendence of the everyday.

Today's missionaries -- food merchants such as Toronto's **Serrano Imports**, which is responsible for the first shipments of Iberian ham to Canada, and tour companies such as Seville's A Question of Taste, which offers Iberian ham tours in the Spanish countryside -- will have little trouble getting us to accept the blessed flesh they're offering. We'll pay handsomely for the privilege of worshipping at the feet of swine, especially if they're attached to those divine haunches of ham. azalewska11@gmail.com