

# The Butcher's Life

CHEF PAUL BERTOLLI TRADES IN HIS TOQUE TO GO HOG WILD.  
BY JASON EDWARDS

**P**aul Bertolli sure knows his sausage. The veteran chef, who has helmed some of the most influential kitchens in the Bay Area (Chez Panisse from 1982 to '92, Oliveto from 1992 to 2004), has since turned his attention to the food world's next big craze, salumi (the Italian term for all salt-cured meats). With the current demand for artisanal foods, age-old Mediterranean recipes are being given a new, gourmet spin. This month, Bertolli launches his latest endeavor, Fra'Mani Handcrafted Salumi ([www.framani.com](http://www.framani.com)), which will feature four types of cured meat and two fresh sausages. The Berkeley Hills resident and irrepressible bon vivant ruminates on his version of the good life: where to hunt hogs in Northern California, what to keep on hand for a dinner party and what to do with horse shinbones, should you happen to have them lying around your kitchen.

## *When did this fascination with cured meats start?*

My grandfather, who immigrated to the US from the Veneto region of Italy in the 1930s, made salumi, so I grew up with this taste memory for many years. I started working as a butcher at Petrini's Market when I was 14 years old; I was already a journeyman and could handle a knife. I had a neighbor who hired me at a delicatessen where we probably had 30 feet of sausages hanging.

## *How did you make the transition from executive chef to full-time salumi maker?*

At Chez Panisse I was curing sausages, and then it all came to a head when I was at Oliveto. We had an event called The Whole Hog in '97 or '98, after I had worked in Italy and spent time on a farm. Italian families would have these roaming pork butchers who would go from farmstead to farmstead in the cold months, and The Whole Hog was reminiscent of that. We'd butcher a hog and put all the parts away for the year. The dinner was a celebration of all the things that had been curing. We'd use the cheeks, the jowl, the tongue, headcheese—everything from snout to tail.

## *Do you miss the kitchen?*

I don't miss it, no. I'm 51 years old and I wanted to [launch Fra'Mani] because I saw a real void in the market for handcrafted salumi. It fits for where I am in my life and with my family.

## *Do you have a favorite piece of equipment?*

My favorite is my grandfather's knife—a scimitar that he made. I also like my horse shinbones that I use to judge a curing meat's quality. They're porous, so you can really smell what's going on inside. Cure-masters use these for judging because they carry the flavor.

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CHEF PAUL BERTOLLI TURNS DOWN THE STOVE—PERHAPS FOR GOOD. “I DON'T WANT TO RUN ANOTHER RESTAURANT,” HE SAYS. “I WANT TO MAKE THIS WORK.” HIS NEW BUSINESS, FRA'MANI HANDCRAFTED SALUMI, DEBUTS THIS MONTH.

## *How is your salumi different?*

You've got to have the right pork. First, our hogs are selected for their genetics and breed. They're heavier than normal, around 350–60 pounds. Since flavor is better with a slightly older animal, I choose ones that are two or three years old. I select different muscles out of the hog, so our two fresh sausages—a sweet sausage flavored with fennel and a spicy, dry Calabrese with hot pepper—are much plumper, stouter, fatter.

## *What's the best way to eat it?*

I want to stop people from thinking you should hide it between slices of bread and douse it with mustard. You should put it on a plate and eat it with good bread and wine. That's it.

## *What do you prefer drinking with your salumi?*

The wine that I think works best is Lambrusco, something that has a high acid with a spritz. Or young reds with a fair amount of nerve in them, and by that I mean acidity.

## *What's a celebration like at the Bertollis'?*

I cook every night for my family now. They love it. I have a garden up here on the hill and a bread oven, and we have a lot of friends who come over to celebrate food. I usually go and find something that captures my interest and makes me hungry—I hunt a lot.

## *Where do you hunt?*

Mostly Healdsburg and Geyserville—hogs are all over Northern California. Last November, while I was on a business trip in the Midwest, I went pheasant hunting in the cornfields and brought back a bunch. We made a party around them.

## *What elements are important to a dinner party?*

Conviviality, good wine and a good fire. I've worked around food for so long that it's natural for me to bring those elements to people.

## *Define the perfect piece of meat.*

The thing about salumi is that it combines the rustic with the refined. It's born in the barnyard and ends up on a platter at the best table. It's absolutely humble and simple and elegant.

## *What's the most sensuous thing you've ever put in your mouth?*

My wife's breast [laughs]. x