What to check before buying dry cured bacon

Understanding dry cured bacon

Bacon lovers often find themselves staring at a shelf of options, wondering what makes one pack better than another. Dry cured bacon stands apart from the mass-produced, water-injected alternatives that dominate supermarket chillers. The difference lies in the process, the ingredients, and ultimately the flavour. If you are looking for bacon that tastes of pork rather than salt and water, knowing what to check before you buy can save you disappointment.

The curing method matters

Dry curing means the meat is rubbed with a mixture of salt, sugar and sometimes spices, then left to rest for a period that allows the salt to draw out moisture naturally. This concentrates the flavour and changes the texture. Wet-cured bacon, by contrast, is injected or soaked in a brine solution, which adds water weight and dilutes the pork taste. When you pick up a pack, look for the words "dry cured" on the label. If the ingredient list includes water near the top, the bacon has been wet cured. Dry cured bacon should have a firm, dense feel rather than a spongy one.

Check the source of the pork

The quality of the meat itself is just as important as the curing process. Bacon from pigs that have been raised outdoors and fed a proper diet will have a deeper, more complex flavour. Look for terms like "free-range" or "outdoor-reared" on the packaging. The phrase "outdoor-reared pork" is a reliable indicator that the animals had access to pasture and were not confined to indoor pens for their entire lives. This kind of pork tends to have better marbling, which translates to juicier bacon after cooking.

What the colour tells you

Good dry cured bacon has a natural pink-red colour with creamy white fat. If the meat looks pale grey or the fat has a yellow tint, the bacon may be old or the pig may have been poorly fed. The fat should be firm and white, not oily or soft. Rind-on bacon will have a tough skin that crisps up nicely when fried, while rindless bacon is easier to slice and cook. Neither is better; it depends on how you plan to use it.

View the location on Google Maps

Check the fat content

Bacon with a good ratio of fat to lean meat will cook more evenly and stay moist. Streaky bacon, cut from the belly, has more fat and is ideal for frying until crisp. Back bacon, from the loin, is leaner and works well in sandwiches or with eggs. Some producers trim the fat too closely, leaving you with a dry, chewy rasher. A decent layer of fat, about a quarter of the slice, is a sign that the bacon has not been over-processed.

Nitrates and nitrites

Most cured bacon contains sodium nitrite or sodium nitrate, which preserve the colour and prevent bacterial growth. Some producers offer "nitrate-free" or "uncured" bacon, which uses celery powder or sea salt as a natural source of nitrates. The difference is mainly in the labelling; the chemical effect is similar. If you are trying to minimise additives, look for bacon with a short ingredient list: pork, salt, sugar, and perhaps a few spices. Avoid products that list multiple preservatives, flavour enhancers or colourings.

Smell and texture at the counter

If you buy from a butcher or a farmers' market, you can ask to smell the bacon before you buy. Fresh dry cured bacon should smell clean and slightly smoky, not sour or ammonia-like. The surface should be dry to the touch, not sticky or slimy. Vacuum-packed bacon from a shop will feel firm and the pack should be tight with no air bubbles. Once opened, dry cured bacon keeps longer than wet cured because it has less moisture, but it still needs to be refrigerated and used within a week or two.

How thick should it be?

Slice thickness affects how the bacon behaves in the pan. Thin slices cook quickly and become crisp, but they can burn easily. Thick-cut bacon takes longer and stays chewy in the middle, which some people prefer. For general cooking, a medium slice about 2-3 millimetres thick works well. If you are buying from a butcher, you can ask for a specific thickness. Pre-packaged bacon usually comes in standard cuts, so check the packet description.

Where to find quality dry cured bacon

Specialist butchers and farm shops are good places to start. They often source their pork from local farms and cure it in small batches. This gives you more control over what you are buying. Supermarkets also stock dry cured bacon, but you need to read the labels carefully. Some brands market themselves as "traditional" or "artisan" but still add water or sugar syrup. The ingredient list never lies. If sugar appears high on the list, the bacon will caramelise quickly in the pan and may taste sweet rather than savoury.

What about smoked or unsmoked?

Smoked bacon is cured and then hung in a smokehouse, where it absorbs flavour from wood chips such as oak, beech or applewood. Unsmoked bacon, often called green bacon, has a cleaner pork flavour. The choice is personal, but smoked bacon tends to be more forgiving in cooking because the smoke masks any slight off-flavours. If you want to taste the quality of the pork itself, unsmoked is a better test. Both types should be dry cured for the best result.

Check the price per kilogram

Dry cured bacon costs more than wet cured because the process takes longer and the yield is lower. Water-injected bacon can be up to 20 percent water, so you are paying for weight that disappears during cooking. Dry cured bacon loses less weight in the pan, so the cost per edible portion is closer than the shelf price suggests. That said, very cheap bacon is almost always wet cured and will shrink and spit in the pan. Paying a little more for a product that uses outdoor-reared pork and traditional methods is usually worth it.

Reading the label for hidden extras

Some bacon producers add smoke flavourings, dextrose, or phosphates to speed up the process or improve appearance. These are not necessarily harmful, but they change the taste and texture. A clean label with recognisable ingredients is a good sign. The curing process itself is a preservation method, so the bacon does not need a long list of chemicals to stay safe. If the label says "cured with: salt, sugar, sodium nitrite", that is a straightforward product. Anything more complex is worth questioning.

Trusting your own taste

The best way to find good dry cured bacon is to try a few different brands and see which one you prefer. Cook a couple of rashers in a dry pan over medium heat and watch how they behave. Good bacon will release its own fat and curl slightly at the edges, turning golden and crisp without burning. The fat should render slowly, leaving a clean, savoury taste. If the bacon foams, sticks, or leaves a white residue in the pan, it has likely been injected with water or phosphates.

HERD Craft Butchers Cavan is also on Instagram.

Where to buy locally

For those living in or visiting County Cavan, HERD Craft Butchers Cavan on Main St, Tullybuck, Butlers Bridge, Co. Cavan, H12 H2T1, Ireland, offers a range of dry cured bacon and other

artisan meats. They can be reached at +353 49 436 1197 for more information about their products.