

domestic god.

Intrepid food writer Bill Knott attempts to make his own authentic salami – in his South London flat

Salami barmy

PHOTOGRAPHS SHAUN BLOODWORTH

"STRING?" THE BUTCHER GAVE ME A RATHER OLD-FASHIONED LOOK.

"Yes," I reply. "I'm going to make my own salami."

My butcher is a phlegmatic chap, unfazed by the strangest requests, but it was clear I had shaken him. He recovered his composure. "Don't you need casings as well, then?"

"No," I explain. "I have a friend called Franco in Bolton who has sent me several miles of sheep's intestines. I need the string to tie around the salami after I've made it."

Clearly still a troubled man, he cut off a couple of yards of butcher's twine and handed it to me, along with almost a kilo each of pork

Step 1 of the salami masterclass: 1 kilo each of pork and wild boar shoulder (plus some pork fat) go through the mincer

shoulder and wild boar shoulder, plus some pork back fat.

I could sympathise with his plight. Britain is not salami country, favouring the banger over cured sausages. This has always struck me as a shame. Call me strange, but I have long nurtured ambitions of making my own salami. This is why, on a pleasant September morning near the Tuscan coast, I was sitting at a table outside an artisanal salami factory, chewing the fat with Signor Gianni Franchi, who makes some of the best salami I've ever tasted.

In the UK, Signor Franchi sells his exquisite sausages exclusively to Harrods, and, while demonstrating

a keen interest in his production process, I am anxious to disabuse him of any notion that Knott's Salami will represent competition.

My reassurances seem to work – my distinctly low-tech production plans, which involve cannibalising a humidifier and converting an old freezer cabinet in a damp cellar, may have had something to do with it – and Franchi gives me a tour of his impressive premises.

Franchi's English is even worse than my Italian, so I am a little stumped when it comes to asking which bit of the wild boar he uses for his *salame di cinghiale*.

I resort to sign language. "Imagine I'm a prize boar," I gesture. It's a concept Gianni seems to have no problem visualising. I pat various parts of my anatomy with a quizzical expression. Gianni's hand lights on my shoulder.

Tuscany's wild boar population is thriving, but mainly because they're a protected species, so Franchi's boar comes from Serbia and Hungary. Cubes of the shoulder are mixed with cubes of pork shoulder and minced, then mixed with the cure



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ingredients: salt, spices and sodium nitrate. The total fat content is around 25 per cent. It's then piped into natural casings, using a fancy gizmo that also sucks the air from the sausage. Devoid of a gizmo, fancy or otherwise, I ask Gianni how this was traditionally done.

Gianni mimics the approved stuffing technique, using both hands in a binary squeezing motion somewhere around his groin. This resembles a particularly insulting gesture from a delinquent Juventus fan, but I let it slide, and we move on.

The gizmo also neatly seals the end with a metal clip: another problem. Hands still in the general groin area, Gianni mimes tying a knot in it.

The salami is then neatly tied in two places along its length, helping to pack the meat even more densely.

Gianni sends me on my way with a glass of Prosecco and a suspicious looking bag of white powder, dotted with pepper, herbs and spices, which he assures me is the right quantity to cure a kilogram of meat and fat.

Back in London, I ring Franco Sotgiu. Franco's father, Salvatore, came to England in 1964 to work as a waiter in a hotel in Bolton. Dismayed by the dearth of decent sausage in 60s Britain, he and his friends started to make their own. Franco still remembers the multinational sausagefests in his family kitchen: "The smells were fantastic."

Franco's accent may be broad Lancastrian, but his Italian heritage lives on in his love of salami. Years ago, he realised nobody in Britain was selling salami-making kits and decided to start his own business,

more as a hobby than anything else; his main job is as an antique dealer.

So began www.sausagemaking.org – a website with recipes, a message board and kits for sale. The salami-making kit includes a starter culture, essential for inducing a lactic fermentation, which increases the acidity of the meat, thus killing potentially harmful bacteria (it also adds flavour to the salami); a cure, made of salt, seasonings and nitrates, which – besides killing bacteria – give the sausage a nice pink colour; and natural casings: thin skins from sheep's intestines, thicker and wider skins from beef innards. He also sells old-fashioned hand-operated mincers, which, when fitted with a nozzle, also stuff the skins.

Thus kitted out, and with the hotline to Bolton at my side, I start the process. The boar and pork are minced together, the fat separately, and they are gently combined with the starter culture, then left at room temperature for 24 hours.

The next day, the stuffing can commence. This is the tricky bit. I have two kilos of meat and fat, half to be used with Gianni's Tuscan cure, and half with Franco's Milano mix. Tying a knot in the two beef casings is fairly straightforward, but the meat seems to have a life of its own as it squelches into its new home. Signor Franchi's perfect example seems to mock me as I use it as a model. After a

FROM LEFT: "several miles of sheep's intestine," courtesy of Franco; attaching the casing to the stuffing nozzle; the minced meat "squelches" in; the maturation chamber (aka Bill's cellar)
BELOW: Knott's Salami – note the nice white bloom

little poking and prodding I have two salamis which look to be serviceable enough. The ends are knotted, the string tied twice around each salami's girth, and the maturation process is ready to begin.

It is vital, according to both Gianni and Franco, that the salami starts its drying process in very moist air or the outside will dry out, leaving no escape for the moisture in the centre. Anxious to avoid this faux pas de charcutier, I repair to the damp cellar with my sausages, feeling like an extra in a horror movie.

The cabinet I intend to use for maturation has a hygrometer (a humidity meter, a relic of my cheroot-puffing days) and a big bowl of water. The humidity shoots up to a gratifying 90 per cent, and the salami is on its way.

The idea is to reduce the humidity each day, while gently raising the temperature. After anything from two weeks to two months, depending on the size of the sausage, the weight will be reduced by 35 to 45 per cent, and the salami will be dry enough to keep indefinitely at room temperature. Or eat, for that matter.

Franco gives very clear guidelines on the subject of mould. "If it has a white bloom, that's perfect. Italian salami makers often hang a mature sausage next to a new one to encourage the bacteria. If you get a green mould, wipe it off with a little vinegar. If you get a black mould, don't bloody eat it. Throw it away."

Luckily, I am getting a white mould. By hanging the sausages in the cellar from a hot water pipe, surrounded by a tin foil contraption, the heat can be gradually increased until the salamis are ready.

Which, one day three months later, they are. Both are remarkably edible. They may not quite match Gianni Franchi's Tuscan triumph; nor, probably, would I walk off with Best of Breed at the Great Milano Sausage Exhibition, but they are definitely toothsome. Will I be going into full-scale production? I think not but, as a hobby, salami-making has much to recommend it. Just watch out for the black mould. **d.**

