

TASTING PREMIUM APPLEWOOD BACONS

Twenty Cook's Illustrated staffers sampled eight bacons, six mail-order artisanal brands and two higher-end brands from the supermarket, all smoked with applewood or cured with apple cider. We cooked them to a uniform doneness on a rimmed baking sheet, using our recipe for Oven-Fried Bacon (go to www.cooksillustrated.com/october for our free recipe), and rated them on saltiness, sweetness, smokiness, and meatiness, as well as overall appeal. Sodium and fat content were provided by the manufacturers. Because pork bellies are an agricultural product, some variation from package to package in flavor and in fat-to-meat ratio could be expected. To ensure that any variation was within an acceptable range, we tasted multiple batches of our two top-rated bacons months apart. A source for the winning brand appears on page 32. Based on our experience, shipping for this brand and the other mail-order bacons will cost \$20 or more.

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

VANDE ROSE FARMS Artisan Dry Cured Bacon, Applewood Smoked
 Price: \$13.95 for 12 ounces, plus shipping
 Description: Dry-cured with brown sugar, salt, and pepper; hand-rubbed; applewood-smoked



FAT/SODIUM
 Size of slice: 33 g
 Sodium per slice: 260 mg
 Fat per slice: 13 g

TESTERS' COMMENTS

Tasters raved that this bacon—which scored a distinct few notches higher than the rest of the lineup—had it all: “Nice balance of sweetness to salt, great deep complex ham flavor, very meaty,” with a “faint fruity taste, sweet and salty.” “A nice, thick cut, very hearty and substantial.” “Classic bacon, but with lots more genuine smoke flavor and in every way better.” “Now you’re talking! This has lots of sex appeal—good balance of everything.” In sum: “A winner.”

RECOMMENDED

NODINE'S SMOKEHOUSE Apple Smoke Flavored Bacon
 Price: \$8 for 16 ounces, plus shipping
 Description: Wet-cured with brown sugar, salt, and spices; smoked over dried apple pomace and hickory or maple hardwood



FAT/SODIUM
 Size of slice: 37 g
 Sodium per slice: 330 mg
 Fat per slice: 18 g

TESTERS' COMMENTS

“Wow, this is some huge piece of amazing bacon. Slices very wide and thick, and even the fat tastes great.” “That’s good eatin’—hulking slices of delectable pork belly, sure to satisfy sweet and smoky fans.” “Nice meatiness” and “great depth here.” “Apple flavor is subtle and it isn’t too smoky.” While it had “good pork flavor,” several tasters felt it “needs more salt.”

APPLEGATE FARMS Uncured Sunday Bacon

Price: \$5.39 for 8 ounces
 Description: Wet-cured with water, sea salt, celery juice, evaporated cane juice, and lactic acid starter culture; smoked over applewood



FAT/SODIUM
 Size of slice: 7 g
 Sodium per slice: 145 mg
 Fat per slice: 2.5 g

SUPERMARKET BEST BUY

One taster praised this nitrite-free supermarket brand for a “subtle smokiness, sweetness of pork, but not sugary, Woodsy but not overly smoky. This is log-cabin bacon.” Another noted, “You get the sense this is right off the pig: natural-tasting.” “Interesting flavor, almost like a cured sausage or ham.” Two identified it as supermarket bacon, “with its heavy salt and mild smoke,” though one taster added, “As a salt-lover, I like it.”

RECOMMENDED WITH RESERVATIONS

FARMLAND/CARANDO Apple Cider Cured Bacon, Applewood Smoked
 Price: \$5.99 for 16 ounces
 Description: Wet-cured with water, sugar, salt, sodium phosphate, natural apple flavoring, sodium erythorbate, and sodium nitrite; smoked over applewood



FAT/SODIUM
 Size of slice: 7.5 g
 Sodium per slice: 125 mg
 Fat per slice: 3 g

SUPERMARKET BEST BUY

TESTERS' COMMENTS

Some found this “sugary” supermarket bacon far too sweet: “a deal breaker for me in bacon,” “like cotton candy!” Others enjoyed its “applelike flavor” and “subtle apple cider undertones,” describing it as “caramelized,” with cinnamon and maple syrup notes, “like it’s been hanging with French toast already,” as well as being “light on smoke and salt, and quite meaty. Delicious!”

OSCAR'S SMOKE HOUSE Applewood Smoked Bacon

Price: \$9.95 for 16 ounces, plus shipping
 Description: Wet-cured with brown sugar and honey; applewood-smoked



FAT/SODIUM
 Size of slice: 4 g
 Sodium per slice: 96 mg
 Fat per slice: 2 g

A few tasters noted an “almost Asian” flavor to this bacon, describing it as like “teriyaki bacon, sweet and tangy” or “soy sauce.” Several noted a “chewy” (a few said “tough”) texture and “relatively meaty” consistency, with “good pork flavor but not really bacon-y,” according to one taster. Others found it “too sweet,” “out of balance,” and “one-dimensional” and deemed it “nothing special.”

NORTH COUNTRY SMOKEHOUSE Applewood Smoked Bacon

Price: \$18.50 for 2 pounds, plus shipping
 Description: Wet-cured in maple syrup and spices; smoked and cooked for eight hours



FAT/SODIUM
 Size of slice: 12 g
 Sodium per slice: 350 mg
 Fat per slice: 3 g

Smoke flavor dominated, according to our tasters, and those who liked smokiness liked this bacon. “Pretty smoky, and very meaty and chewy. Thick, hearty, and fairly hamlike,” said one taster. “Delicious.” But the majority disagreed: “Wow, a lot of smoke, like barbecued bacon. Too much for me.”

NOT RECOMMENDED

NIMAN RANCH Applewood Smoked Dry-Cured Bacon
 Price: \$7.98 for 12 ounces, plus shipping
 Description: Dry cured, smoked over applewood chips



FAT/SODIUM
 Size of slice: 15 g
 Sodium per slice: 140 mg
 Fat per slice: 7 g

TESTERS' COMMENTS

“A fairly average piece of bacon,” “thin,” “not sweet or deeply flavorful,” “needs more sweetness.” One taster noted it “tastes like smoke, but not much else; very fatty.” Another agreed: “I felt like I was eating straight fat with no flavor. Disgusting.” A few noted a distinctly “gamy,” “funky” taste.

NUESKE'S Applewood Smoked Bacon
 Price: \$19.95 for 2 pounds, plus shipping
 Description: Wet-cured with salt, sugar, sodium phosphate, sodium erythorbate, and sodium nitrite for 24 hours; hung to dry for 24 hours, then applewood-smoked for 24 hours



FAT/SODIUM
 Size of slice: 9 g
 Sodium per slice: 180 mg
 Fat per slice: 3.5 g

Despite the company’s claims of using particularly lean hogs, our tasters found this bacon “very fatty” with “hardly any meat,” and many complained of its “overwhelming smoke flavor,” which was akin to licking a “wood-burning stove” or “ashtray.”