

HAM

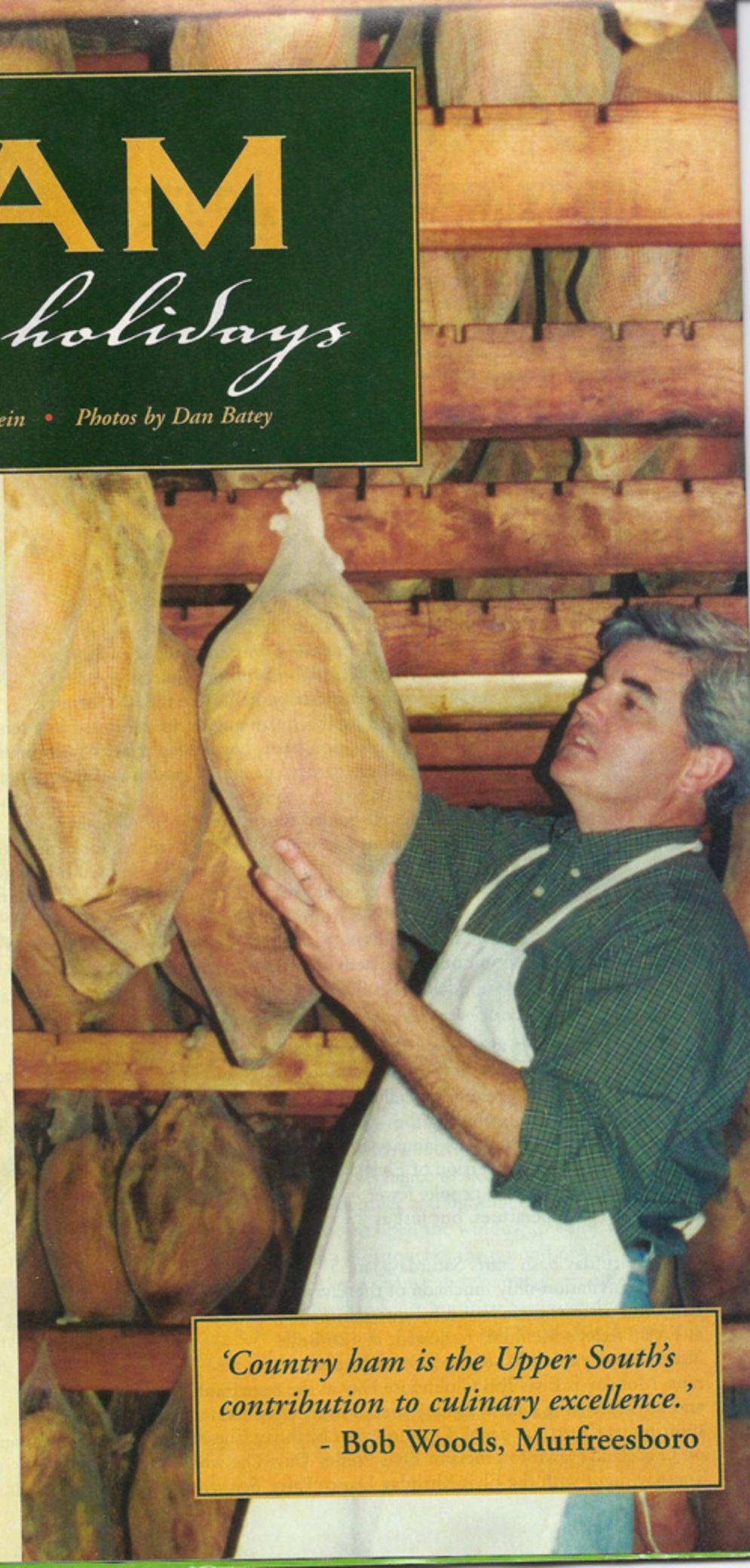
for the holidays

Story by Karin Beuerlein • Photos by Dan Batey

*Christmas just
wouldn't be Christmas
without a Tennessee
country ham*

Pay a visit to Bob Woods at Murfreesboro's G&W Hamery, and you can't help but notice the wall is covered with blue ribbons. Fat ribbons, skinny ribbons, short ones, long ones. They date from 2001, when Woods took home his fifth state grand championship, back to 1969, the first year a G&W country ham was entered in the Tennessee State Ham Show at MTSU. First ham entered, first grand championship. You sense these people might know something about ham.

Woods inherited the business from his uncle, veterinarian Sam "Little Doc" Woods, in 1981. Dr. Woods and his partner, Colonel Tom Givan, founded the Hamery in 1969 after getting caught up in nostalgic reminiscences about the country ham and biscuits they ate in their youth. In their opinion, the stuff you bought in stores was hardly



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- Bob Woods, Murfreesboro

what you could call "cured." They set up shop in Sam's father's old veterinary hospital building and started turning out hams that set the state fair abuzz. (When you do visit Woods, and I know you will, ask him about the notches in the center post of the Hamery. When you set up a ham shop in an old veterinarian's haunt, there are always good stories to tell.)

The youngest Woods continues their tradition to this day, using the same 1940 recipe that his grandfather, Old Doc, got from a brother-in-law in McMinnville. Woods rubs his hams down with a dry mixture of salt, sugar, and saltpeter before smoking and curing them.

"Country ham is the Upper South's contribution to culinary excellence," says Woods. He notes that the country ham curing process first began out of necessity, when pioneers needed a yearlong food source. The chilly winters and hot summers of the Upper South (Virginia, Tennessee, Kentucky, Arkansas, North Carolina, and the northern parts of Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi) made the curing process possible. Early residents of the area could slaughter hogs in the fall and eat portions of the curing meat all year long.

At the G&W Hamery, the curing process starts in January, when Woods gets all 1500 of his hams from a meat processor in the Midwest. The "green" (uncured) hams are salted down on a low table, refrigerated, and then re-salted 10 days later, a process Woods refers to as "overhaul." He doesn't rub the mixture in vigorously; the process is actually quite delicate. "It should be like a light snow," Woods says, "just covering the surface."



The hams are then refrigerated again until mid-February, when the outdoor temperature is typically 50 to 55 degrees, which Woods says is ideal for the curing process. Brought out of storage, the hams are pressure-washed and then hung in nets to dry. This modern practice of hanging in nets is why today's hams have a rounder, more attractive shape than old-fashioned home-cured hams, which were typically hung on a wire and grew long and stretched-out as the season progressed.

After about two weeks of drying, the hams are ready to smoke. According to lore, the time to smoke a ham is "when the peach trees bloom," Woods says, or in March or early April, for those of you with no peach trees. The hams are placed in the curing rooms, where hickory and apple wood are piled in metal troughs and lit to produce a slow, smoldering blaze. Fans circulate the smoky air to every ham in the room over the course of four or five days. "It's just enough to give them a light color," says Woods. "You don't taste much smoke in the meat."

The hams are left to cure in the same room where they're smoked. Woods says that G&W used to have a separate area for each part of the curing process, but lugging 1500 24-pound hams around proved to be more backache than he needed. So the hams hang in the smoking rooms awaiting the heat of summer, which will intensify the flavor and produce the smoky tang that country ham lovers find ideal: "They just sit here and age and get better every day."

