

The Proustian Ideal of a Ham Sandwich

For French sandwich shops in New York, jambon beurre — ham on a buttered baguette — is one of the most difficult yet satisfying feats.



Jambon beurre sandwiches at L'Ami Pierre. The ends will be fully trimmed before they are presented to customers. Credit...Karsten Moran for The New York Times



By [Florence Fabricant](#)

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Cooking Feast on recipes, food writing and culinary inspiration from Sam Sifton and NYT Cooking.

Jambon beurre, meaning ham-butter, or just ham on buttered baguette, might be the quintessential French sandwich. It’s a staple for a picnic or a quick lunch with a tot of Beaujolais. And it sounds easy enough.

But, as Pierre-Antoine Raberin recalled, it prompted the chef Alain Ducasse to note that “the simpler things can be most difficult.”

Mr. Raberin, who owns L’Ami Pierre, a new cafe in Midtown Manhattan, with the chef Eric Ripert, seconded that assessment, pointing out that the ideal jambon beurre — say, what you might find at countless cafes in Paris or what his kitchen will prepare for you — isn’t easy to replicate at home.







“Freshness and temperature are the keys,” he said. At the cafe, which considers that particular sandwich its signature, baguettes come out of the oven every hour or so. The butter it uses, from an upstate farm, is notably rich — about 85 percent butterfat (the supermarket standard is 80 percent) — and kept soft and spreadable.

Mr. Raberin also said both sides of the baguette are buttered. Some purveyors, like Le Petit Parisien, a French-style sandwich spot that started in the East Village in 2015, and has branched out into Harlem and, as of a month ago, the Upper East Side, butter only one side.

Image



Both sides of the baguette are buttered with a rich — 85 percent butterfat — butter from an upstate farm. Credit...Karsten Moran for The New York Times



As for the ham, it “should not be cold,” Mr. Raberin said, “and it’s important to be generous with it.” L’Ami Pierre uses lightly smoked, thinly sliced cooked ham, also from an upstate purveyor, and piles about four ounces on each sandwich.

Of course, the home sandwich-maker could go to a bakery for a fresh baguette and warm it in the oven. And many markets sell high butterfat butter. But the ham is the challenge: Everyday boneless deli ham will not do since such products often contain water or brine.

What the French call jambon de Paris, cooked ham, preferably on the bone and freshly sliced, is the goal. Some fancy food markets, including [Schaller & Weber](#) and [Agata & Valentina](#), sell it. [Les Trois Petits Cochons](#) makes and sells it at a number of stores and online sites. Italian prosciutto cotto, cooked ham, also carried by specialty markets, is a good substitute.

You can find jambon beurre at a number of spots across the city, like [Frenchette Bakery](#), [Balthazar](#), the new [Pavé](#) and [Épicerie Boulud](#), where it comes with slices of Gruyère. And the advantage to buying, not making, the sandwich is a matter of French fashion: It will come partly cut in half and tightly wrapped in paper, just one end peeking out, and like a perfectly tied scarf, with that touch of French panache.