

Travel

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ITALY

All honor the hallowed ham

Tyrolean villages lift steins to farm life and a smoked specialty

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VAL DI FUNES — Prosciutto may be this country's most famous ham, but the folks who make speck have more fun. On the first weekend in October, about 10,000 people converge on the minuscule village of Santa Maddalena in Val di Funes for the annual Speckfest. It's a scene as surreal as the Dolomite Mountains that spring up in jagged spikes on the horizon of this Heidi-esque landscape in the Alto Adige region of Italy, tucked against the Austrian border.

I consider myself a ham fan, having grown up on salty Appalachian hams, tasted my way through the mountains of southern Spain (jamón ibérico and jamón serrano), sampled the wares of every prosciutto maker in San Daniele (in the neighboring Friuli-Venezia-Giulia region), nibbled Portuguese presunto wrapped around frog-skin melon. I've scarfed



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down juniper-smoked Westphalian ham and sweet Black Forest ham. But until I visited Alto Adige last fall, I had never tasted anything like the region's speck — a lightly smoked, hauntingly spiced ham that's midway between the heavily cured hams of Germany and the air-dried hams of the Mediterranean mountains.

But then the largely German-speaking Italians of Alto Adige, also known as Südtirol (South Tyrol), straddle a cultural line between Mitteleuropa and the Mediterranean. The road signs are in Italian and German, and the big city is called Bolzano, or Bolzen, depending on whom you ask. But everyone here speaks speck because the local ham puts them on the in-

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Farmers become folkloric dancers and toss each other into the air at Speckfest in Santa Maddalena.