



Mutton on the menu

It fell out of fashion and was seen as the 'poor man's meat' but mutton is making a welcome return, says Andrea Mynard

Not so long ago, mutton and hogget was rarely seen on a menu or butcher's counter; yet many of us are starting to rediscover the outstanding flavour that previous generations enjoyed. Cooked long and slow in red wine or home-made cider, a leg of mutton can provide a rich feast. Far from the 'scraggy old ewe' image that mutton suffered in post-war years due to austere styles of cooking, if well-bred, reared on natural grass or heather, and well-hung, this is meat to be savoured.

A resurgence in our appetites for mutton and hogget has to be good news for small-scale British farmers who have previously struggled to sell mature ewes. For smallholders who are wondering how to get most value from a small area of land, providing grazing for a few rare-breed sheep and keeping some for longer can be a great option that will provide tasty benefits for the family table.

Definition of mutton

Mutton is meat from ewes over two years old, whereas hogget is between lamb and

mutton and is meat from sheep between 12 and 24 months.

In areas of the UK where good grazing is plentiful, shepherds historically used to keep a few lambs for longer as it cost little extra and resulted in more meat per animal. In areas such as the North York moors, wild grazing by mature ewes on the grass, heather and herbs contributed to the landscape, while in the milder, easier pastures of the Cotswolds, sheep did a great job of maintaining the lush rolling countryside.

Bob Lennard, who manages the National Sheep Association's Make More of Mutton initiative and has written a book called 'Much Ado About Mutton' explains;

"In its Victorian heyday, mutton was either from wethers (castrated males), which had produced a few crops of wool; or ewe mutton, which was from animals which had produced a few crops of lambs. Following the arrival of man-made fibres and the collapse of the wool price, it became uneconomical to keep wethers for wool, and so today almost all UK mutton is from ewes."

I visited Peter Harkness, who first started grazing a few sheep at his home in Yorkshire before moving to Windrush Farm in the Cotswolds, to find out more about the old breeds of sheep he rears and why he keeps some for hogget and mutton.

Peter's Windrush Berrichons, Poll Dorsets (an old English breed) and Whitefaced Woodlands (an ancient Yorkshire breed from the Pennine hills) are all naturally reared on pasture and most are sold as pedigree sheep for breeding.

Rightly proud of the many First in Class Rosettes that his pedigrees recently came away with from the Three Counties Show, Peter and Ben Stayt, a local fourth generation shepherd, grade the sheep from six months onwards into show, commercial and meat animals. Often the sheep are a year old before Peter and Ben realise they're not perfect pedigree specimens – but these ewes will provide perfectly good meat. Similarly, ewes that are two or three years old and proving not to be good breeders will provide excellent mutton.

Having previously farmed a few sheep in Yorkshire before taking on 20 acres at Windrush Farm, Peter has experienced sheep grazing on very different pastures:

"In Yorkshire, farmers often let their sheep graze on the Pennine hills," he explains. "From spring until autumn they rarely see them. Here they have nice grass in woodlands and fields – there's a bit more meat, they don't work as hard. You've got to take advantage of whatever you've got."



Ben Stayt with his prize winner at Windrush Farm, Berrichon

Peter now rents a few more acres for summer grazing and has found that several of his neighbours have more land than they need and are very happy to have it grazed by Peter's sheep to save on maintenance. Clearly passionate about sheep farming, Peter told me why he loves sheep farming.

"I like breeding sheep, they're interesting, versatile animals, generally hassle free – I'd like more people to breed them," he says. "I think it would be better for us and for our countryside if we ate more sheep meat and less imported lamb. It would keep life in our villages and countryside too."

He also feels that with meat from very young lambs, 'you need to artificially add flavour'. Hogget and mutton, however, beside letting the animals have a decent life and providing more meat (typically 60 kilos as hogget, 30 of which is marketable meat) gives you a 'completely different meat.'

It's a healthy meat too; mutton has been found to have 40 per cent higher levels of Omega 3 fatty acids than lamb and is a rich source of vitamins B6, B12, thiamine and iron.

There are some great ideas for cooking mutton on the Mutton Renaissance website



Mutton winning pen at three counties

(founded by the Prince of Wales to boost the incomes of family farms) including Braised Mutton, Caper Cobbler and Mutton Broth. The rich, red meat from mature ewes is also perfect in more exotic dishes such as spiced stews, tagines and curries. However you decide to serve it, long, slow cooking and the addition of liquid of some sort is the secret to enjoying hogget and mutton at its most delicious.

Mrs Beeton comments on mutton in her 1861 'Book of Household Management': "Although we have heard, at various intervals, growlings expressed at the inevitable 'saddle of mutton' at the dinner-parties of our middle classes, yet we doubt whether any other joint is better liked, when it has been well hung and artistically cooked."

Well hung is a good point – for tasty hogget or mutton you want meat from animals fed on a forage-based diet and matured for at least two weeks post slaughter. A leg of



Stewed mutton

mutton is a wonderful, generous roasting joint and you can even salt and dry it like a ham.

For the best flavour combinations, hogget and mutton generally goes wonderfully well with the fruit, vegetables and tipples that have been grown, picked or bottled in the area it's grazed. Peter Harkness recommends browning some large mutton chops, then cooking for several hours (covered) in cider and honey. Garden vegetables and some pearl

barley are great additions to the pot. Or try a slow-cooked shoulder or leg joint with hedgerow berries such as blackberries or damsons and home-made wine.

I have to agree with Bob Kennard that, although mutton is the ultimate slow food, grown slowly, hung slowly and cooked slowly: "Unfortunately, the flavour is so deep and complex, and the meat so tender, that it's eaten quickly!" ■

Further reading

To read more about mutton, see www.aboutmutton.com

To buy hogget, mutton, wool or pedigree sheep stock see www.windrushfarm.co.uk

For mutton recipes and more info about mutton, see www.muttonrenaissance.org.uk

For sheep products, including lambing supplies and showing products, see www.show-box.co.uk

To read Andrea Mynard's blog about relishing growing, cooking and eating home-grown/home-reared food, see www.shabbychick.me.uk