



# From Pasture to Plate

Diners looking for “local” on the menu need search no further than the many faces of lamb.

By Jan Greenberg

James Holmes serves this Texas lamb T-bones with horseradish crème fraîche as one of several lamb dishes on the menu at Olivia.

Lamb. It's the first domesticated animal mentioned in the Bible. Its meat is one of the few against which there are almost no religious taboos. It's a symbol of purity. It can supply milk, meat and material for clothing. And it can be raised on land that is too arid or too poor for other types of agriculture. For many cultures, it is both a daily staple and the focus of a celebratory meal. And on food blogs and Twitter, it is being hailed as "the new pork."

Yet, according to the American Lamb Board, Denver, the average person living in the U.S. not only consumes less than a pound of lamb a year, as opposed to 60 pounds of beef, but fully a third of the eating public has never even tasted it.

Although most supermarket lamb comes from New Zealand or Australia, the world's top lamb-exporting countries, American-raised lamb is slowly making inroads. In 2002, the American Lamb Board was created to strengthen the domestic lamb market. And under the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) recent proactive promotion of small and local production, direct marketing and farmers markets, the many small-scale lamb operations are seeing new support.

In many ways, sheep are the ideal pasture-to-plate animal. According to Megan Wortman, executive director of the American Lamb Board, American lamb is meatier on the bone than imported lamb

Michael Psilakis says the recipe for this Greek "hamburger" with the flavors of Cypriot cuisine evolved from the more traditional *seftalia*, small pork meat patties stuffed with mint and wrapped in caul fat.



## Texas Lamb T-bones with Horseradish Crème Fraîche

James Holmes, Chef  
Olivia  
Austin, Texas

Yield: 3 servings

1 T. Dijon-style mustard  
¼ cup extra virgin olive oil  
1 jalapeño, minced  
3 garlic cloves, chopped  
Handful fresh rosemary  
3 Texas lamb T-bones  
Salt and pepper, to taste  
Horseradish Crème Fraîche (recipe follows)

*Method:* Combine mustard, oil, jalapeño, garlic and rosemary; rub on lamb. Put lamb in plastic bag or bowl for several hours. Remove from marinade; season both sides with salt and pepper. Grill

approximately 3 minutes per side for medium-rare.

### Horseradish Crème Fraîche:

¼ cup buttermilk  
1 cup cream  
1 cup freshly ground horseradish  
½ cup lemon juice, freshly squeezed  
1 T. Worcestershire sauce  
1 T. chopped parsley  
Pinch of salt

*Method:* In nonreactive bowl, stir together buttermilk and cream. Cover; store in warm place overnight. Stir in horseradish, lemon juice, Worcestershire, parsley and salt. Serve over lamb T-bones.

*Recipe courtesy of the American Lamb Board*

and, as it's often finished on grain, milder in flavor than New Zealand lamb, which is usually raised exclusively on pasture. And unlike beef and pork, which are raised in confined conditions and fed prophylactic antibiotics and hormones to increase muscle mass and growth rate, the American Lamb Board promotes no antibiotics or hormones for lamb that goes to market.

There are more than 80,000 sheep operations in the nation, from flocks as

small as 50 to range operations in the West that exceed 1,000, with shepherds who live with the sheep and the dogs that guard them from predators and help move them to new grass and water. Worldwide, there are roughly 1,300 different breeds, some producing more meat, others more wool and still others more milk. Taste, as is true of all animals, is determined both by age and diet, although the gamy taste that is sometimes associated with lamb is more a function of the flavor profile of the fat.

# FLAVORS

## A taste for lamb

Craig Rogers, owner of Border Springs Farm LLC in Patrick Springs, Va., raises lamb for several restaurants, including Washington, D.C.'s Zaytinya (one of José Andrés' restaurants), which focuses on Middle Eastern foods and flavors. Rogers sells whole animals to chef Mike Isabella, who, despite being asked to "pack your knives" after a stint on "Top Chef," is the reason the restaurant is consistently singled out as one of the capital's best places to eat.

Rogers' operation is certified by Animal Welfare Approved, Alexandria, Va., which has developed standards that apply to farm operations from birth to slaughter. He raises Katahdin sheep, a relatively new breed developed in Maine in the 1950s, which actually sheds its wool and doesn't need to be sheared. "I chose the breed because the meat is mild, which satisfies American taste," says Rogers. He raises an older breed for himself, preferring a more "lamby" flavor.

"A lot of people like Dorsets, because they are the greatest mothers, producing lots of milk, which obviously creates a nice, healthy lamb," he says. "But if you eat one, it is going to be kind of musky in taste. Others like Suffolks, which are big animals and you get a lot of meat. But again, there's that pungent taste."

Like many small growers, Rogers can adapt the meat to chefs' preferences. "Many of my chefs like me to feed some grain at the end," he says. "Some of them found that the chops were so lean they wouldn't hold their shape well, and getting

a little marbling in the [rib] eye helps in preparation and presentation."

One chef who prefers his lamb raised totally on grass is Joshua Smith, whose restaurant, Local Roots Café, is Roanoke, Va.'s, first farm-to-table venue. Smith buys whole lambs from Rogers, and describes him as "intensely passionate about what he does." He's also smart, according to Smith. "He's picked a breed that he can market, as a farmer, and he understands that chefs need a product that they can sell to their guests. The lamb is super-clean and raised right. He is constantly filling us in on matters of animal husbandry and food issues, which too often we chefs don't have time to explore ourselves, even when we're interested."

Lamb saddle wrapped in breast and roasted over hay, as well as lamb burgers, are regular menu fixtures, but Smith has also featured chilled lamb heart braised in sesame seed, fried kidney wrapped in rainbow chard, lamb tartare and lamb kidney confit. "We butcher the whole animal, so I can portion it myself," he says. "Some gets into sausage, but we use every single part of it—livers, spleen, ribs, tongue."

## Lamb on the menu

In Austin, Texas, James Holmes is executive chef/owner of Olivia, named by *Bon Appétit* one of 2009's top10 best new restaurants in America. He worked at Tom Colicchio's Craft and Terrance Brennan's Picholine in New York before heading to Strasbourg, France, to work at Le Panier du Marché. There, he and the head chef went to the local markets each day to gather produce,



Brad Harris

This lamb saddle wrapped in its breast and roasted over hay is served with carrots, corn and chard at Local Roots Café.

meats and cheeses for that night's menu, a practice he uses today at Olivia, where lamb, in all its forms, is a regular menu item.

"I get almost all my lamb from Loncito Cartwright of Twin Oaks Ranch in Dinero, Texas," says Holmes. "Cartwright's breed is from a Dorper lineage, which is a South African hair sheep, so it isn't good for wool or milk but has great meat. He's a great producer, and like most small farmers, it isn't easy for him. He has to drive almost four hours each way to the nearest USDA licensed slaughterhouse. Often, I end up meeting him on the side of the highway to pick up the meat."

Holmes says when he was first starting to cook professionally, the only lamb offered was lamb chops. Now he serves a lamb tongue fricassee accompanied by grilled local fruit, lamb fries with a whole-grain mustard aioli, paprika lamb shanks, lamb liver and onions, and lamb hearts that he cuts into small strips, tops with a deseeded jalapeño pepper half, wraps with home-cured bacon and grills to order.

"People do sometimes say, 'You've got a lot of lamb [on the menu],' but I'm trying to use all of the animal," Holmes says.

"My customers understand that this is a somewhat more adventurous restaurant, although you can be safe here and get a vegetable plate if that's what you want."

In the Colorado mountain town of Carbondale, Mark Fischer is chef/owner of Six89. Before opening the restaurant, he staged in New York at Le Cirque, Mesa Grill and Fatty Crab. "We've always tried to source animals locally, and over the years it has become fairly easy to find pigs," he says. "Lately, though, lamb has become more available. Just a couple of months ago, a gentleman with a ranch in nearby Meeker showed up at the door and said, 'I raise lamb.'

"Turned out to be Pat Sturgeon of Cross Six Sheep Company, and he's been raising grass-fed, free-ranging sheep for over 30 years. A neighbor suggested that he try to market the meat to restaurants. These animals have a remarkable diet. They are herded onto different slopes with different grades and varieties of grasses, and forage on scrub oak and juniper berries. The sheep are a Targhee/Hampshire cross, which means that they are hardy animals and good on rugged terrains, regularly produce good-size lambs and convert grass into meat more efficiently than most breeds."

Even in Colorado, though, in what is one of the larger sheep-producing areas of the nation, there is a dearth of USDA-



Mark Fischer

licensed processing facilities, which, as Fischer points out, theoretically makes it much easier just to order meat from a food supply company. "Turns out I'm the first person who ever asked Pat what his breed is," he says. "I find it profoundly lamby in the very best sense of the word. It's not like a gamy mutton-type taste. It just has a clean flavor, it cooks well, is popular with our customers and we are just enchanted by it."

Fischer's menus change monthly, and his January offerings included a lamb prosciutto; curry-braised lamb osso buco in red wine served with cauliflower, chickpeas, pine nuts, raisins and spinach in a curry vinaigrette; and a milk-and-honey slow-roasted lamb neck served with pecorino agnolotti, roasted roma tomatoes and greens.

#### Every edible part

Perhaps lamb's most visible ambassador right now is Michael Psilakis, whose book, *How to Roast a Lamb: New Greek Classic Cooking* (Little, Brown and Company, 2009), is as much the story of his family and its influence on his evolution as a chef as it is a source for creative and contemporary Greek recipes, many of which, of course, are based on lamb. Psilakis is chef at three New York restaurants—Anthos, the only Greek restaurant to receive a Michelin star, Kefi,

Curry-braised Cross Six lamb osso buco in red wine served with cauliflower and chickpea salad with raisins and spinach is on the menu at Six89.

and Gus & Gabriel (named after his son and late father).

Psilakis first came to prominence in New York with his special offal menu, incorporating almost every edible part of the lamb. The idea took root from his experience witnessing his father slaughter the family's Easter lamb when Psilakis was 11 years old.

"Michael," Psilakis quotes his father as saying, "When Mommy cooks something for us to eat for dinner, and it's something you think you might not like because it's part of the animal you don't like the sound of, think before you say you're not going to eat it. Because when you reject that liver, tongue or cheeks, you are essentially saying that this animal gave its life for nothing . . . When you think about that lamb and what it gave up for us so that we could eat, you understand that we killed a living thing, and we must always respect and honor that animal by using everything it has to offer."

Jan Greenberg, author of *Hudson Valley Harvest* (Countryman Press, 2003), is based in Rhinebeck, N.Y.