

Lamb becoming popular with locavores

By Debbie Arrington, Sacramento Bee

It's lean, local and literally a different animal. Today's lamb has become the locavore's sustainable meat of choice, grass-fed and sourced from family farms.

"It's quintessentially celebratory," said butcher Ryan Harris of Napa's The Fatted Calf. "It has so much flavor. If you get lamb from the right place, there's nothing like it."



Lamb is a popular Easter meal. Photo/LTN

And California is lamb central, producing more of this flavorful meat than any other state. That's good news this spring holiday season, when lamb is a traditional favorite for Easter and Passover.

"Lamb sales always spike in spring, at least double the rest of the year," said Megan Wortman, executive director of the American Lamb Board.

Local lamb is now available year-round, particularly in California. More than 4,000 farmers raised about 600,000 sheep and lambs in 2012. Births are timed to keep a steady supply.

“Just five or six years ago, you could not find lamb consistently at the grocery store,” Wortman said.

Overall, U.S. lamb consumption remained flat through the recession, averaging less than one pound per person a year. By comparison, Americans eat about 270 pounds of beef a year. In recent years, chefs and consumers have switched from imported New Zealand lamb to local sources. American lamb now accounts for about half of total U.S. sales.

“That’s really exciting for us,” Wortman said. “The meat hasn’t traveled 10,000 miles. In Northern California, local lamb is everywhere.”

Almost a century after the U.S. government waged an “Eat No Lamb” campaign to increase wool production, lamb still battles bad perception.

One issue was taste. Today’s lamb tastes better. As demand for wool went down, many ranchers switched to meat breeds with milder flavor.

Overcooked, any lamb can be tough or stringy. Its outside layer of hard fat burns at a lower temperature than beef and can smell gamey. Lamb from older animals can taste gamey, too.

“Someone can have one bad experience and never come back,” Wortman said. “That’s why we recommend to always cook lamb medium-rare. Pull it from the oven at 135 degrees and let it rest 10 minutes. It will be perfect every time.”

Another issue: price.

“People think it’s expensive; rack of lamb (the prime rib of lamb) is the highest-priced menu item,” Wortman said. “But there are many other flavorful cuts.”

For example, Harris loves lamb neck. “It has a lot of meat, bone and fat, which means a lot of flavor. It’s a braising cut and really good.”

The Fatted Calf sells McCormack Ranch lamb raised in Rio Vista. "It's always in high demand," Harris said. "It's really phenomenal lamb."

Karin and Keith Sinclair are among those local lamb farmers who sell directly to the public. At their Penryn ranch, the Sinclairs started raising sheep in 1998 when their daughter Kristina turned 9 and joined 4-H; a ewe was her first project.

Now, the Sinclairs have about 100 ewes, 130 lambs and counting. They raise Dorset, Hampshire and Cheviot sheep among other breeds.

"In California, we have mild weather and good grasses," said Karin Sinclair, president of the Gold Country Sheep Producers Association. "That means very mild-flavored lamb."

Sinclair enjoys the less expensive cuts such as kebabs, shanks and sirloin roasts.

"I think a lot of people are intimidated by lamb," she said. "They think it's pricey and needs expensive seasoning. I marinate (roast or kebabs) in apple juice, rosemary and garlic overnight in a Ziplock bag. It's awesome on the grill. Really, nothing is simpler."

Lamb 101

Nutrition: Lamb is very similar to lean beef in its profile – often with fewer calories. Grass-fed lamb tends to have less fat than its grain-fed meat counterparts such as beef or pork.

The leanest lamb cuts are leg, sirloin and shank, with 2 to 3 grams of saturated fat per 3-ounce serving. Containing the same protein as beef (23 grams), 3 ounces of lamb averages 160 calories, almost 30 less than 90 percent lean hamburger. But a quarter-pound ground lamb patty has about 20 calories more than its beef counterpart.

Besides protein, lamb also is a good source of vitamin B12,

niacin, selenium (an antioxidant) and zinc.

Selection: Lamb has less marbling than beef, which makes for lean meat. A 6-pound leg (which is always a back leg with some sirloin attached) will serve 6 to 8 people.

Shoulder cuts – such as arm or blade chops or shoulder roasts – are the No. 1 retail cuts, according to the American Lamb Board. Shanks come from front legs.

Rack of lamb – the tenderest and most expensive cut – is the prime rib of lamb. One rack contains seven to eight ribs. “Frenching” means the meat on the rack was trimmed back to expose the rib bones. A crown roast is two racks, trimmed and tied together.

Younger lamb has milder flavor. Look for fresh pink or cherry red; it denotes a younger animal (under 1 year old). Baby lamb looks pale pink, like veal. Dark purplish red meat usually means the lamb was closer to 1 year when it went to market. By USDA regulation, lamb must be younger than 1 year.

Storage: Cook or freeze ground lamb or smaller cuts within three days of purchase; roasts will keep up to five days. To freeze, wrap tightly in plastic wrap. Use within three months for ground lamb, six months for other cuts. Cooked meat will keep three days in the refrigerator.

Always defrost lamb in the refrigerator and not at room temperature. It keeps the moisture in the meat.

Preparation: Use lamb like beef – roast, grill, fry, braise. Because of its lower fat content, lamb tends to cook more quickly than beef. Be careful not to overcook; past medium, lamb gets tough. Keep it pink.

For roasts or leg of lamb, roast at 325 degrees until the meat reaches an internal temperature of 135 degrees. That’s about 15-20 minutes a pound for bone-in roasts; 20-25 minutes a

pound for boneless. Remove from oven and let rest 10 minutes. The internal temperature will reach 145 degrees.