

The Flavour of Mutton?

As well as the cultural and culinary heritage of mutton, it is its flavour which is a key to selling quality the meat. Some say it tastes like a mixture of beef, venison and lamb, with a touch of sweetness. One thing it is not is simply strong lamb!

Seasonality

The traditional season is autumn & winter, but some suppliers offer it year-round.

Cooking

Whilst previously a factor in the decline of mutton, cooking the meat today couldn't be simpler, and the rule is 'slow to be sure'. A few cuts can be cooked quickly by experienced cooks, but most reliably delicious results come from long, slow cooking. With increasingly busy lifestyles, slow cooking has been unfashionable for the last few decades, but with modern electric slow cookers, especially programmable ones, cooking a delicious mutton dish is now easy, and reliable. There are plenty of recipes around - the internet has many. Watch this space for recipe leaflets from Make More of Mutton.

Marketing Quality Mutton

There are various ways to market quality mutton. However, as with most quality products, it often helps to tell the story behind the meat. Try the ABCD of quality mutton. Tell customers the Age, Breed, Chilling/Hanging period and Diet which the animals were fed, as well as who and where the animals are from. Point of sale marketing material is available from the NSA's Make More of Mutton (MMOM) initiative (see below).



Make More of Mutton

The National Sheep Association, with funding from Eblex, HCC and LMCNI, has embarked on a new project to support quality mutton supply chains, building on the work of HRH The Prince of Wales' Mutton Renaissance. Called Make More of Mutton, the work aims to popularise quality mutton, and to continue the return of the meat to its Victorian pride of place in British cooking.

Contact: MMOM Manger Bob Kennard at mutton@nationalsheep.org.uk.



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Retailers' Guide to Selling Quality Mutton

What is Mutton?

Mutton is defined as sheep meat over two years old. In the Victorian period, an ideal animal was around 4 to 6 years old. Until wool became uneconomic in the mid-20th century, mutton was from both wethers (castrated males used for wool production, producing 'wether mutton') and ewes which are no longer able to produce lambs ('ewe mutton'). Today mutton is almost invariably ewe mutton, and much of it is sought by the ethnic Indian and other communities.

Why is mutton not more popular?

The eating experience of quality mutton has been praised by British writers over the centuries. Indeed, during the Victorian period, mutton was more popular than beef, whereas today it is often hard to find. Its decline is due to changed agricultural practices, wartime folk memories and modern lifestyles.

With the decline in wool profitability, wether mutton has almost disappeared, leaving a reduced supply of mutton from ewes. From the late C19th, lamb supplies increased with intensification of farming, and production in the New World, such as New Zealand. Quality mutton needs good quality animals, careful slaughter, hanging, butchering and cooking, requiring time often not available to busy people today. However, this approach is now changing, and quality mutton is back on the menu. Having tried it, most people are hooked!



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What to look for when selling quality mutton

Defining a Quality Carcass

Age

Quality mutton animals should be at least two years old. Rams should be avoided.

Breeds

The Victorians were passionate about breeds of animal and their impact on flavour and texture of meat. For mutton, they considered three groups of breeds to be superior:

Upland – smaller, hardy breeds which thrived in harsh upland conditions such as Welsh Mountain, Scotch Blackface and Herdwick.

Downland – those breeds found on the chalk downs of southern England and elsewhere – the Southdown was a favourite, as were others such as the Oxford Down and Shropshire.

Primitive - breeds found predominantly on the western islands of the UK, such as the Hebridean, Soay (from St Kilda) and Manx.

This list of breeds is not exclusive, and good mutton is to be had from other breeds.

Diet

The Victorians were great supporters of grass-fed animals, due to the perceived benefits to flavour, especially those grazing the herbs and wild plants on the tops of hills and mountains. The health benefits of grass-fed animals are being rediscovered today. The Omega 3 to Omega 6 ratio, is more beneficial to human health (closer to 1:1) in grass-fed ruminant meat than grain-fed.

Body Condition

For a quality mutton carcass, there must be a sufficient but not excessive covering of fat - levels of 2 to 3H are generally considered ideal. With upland and primitive breeds, fat tends to be external, but some other breeds can produce excessive fat between the muscle blocks, which should be avoided. Carcass weights are higher than for lambs. Conformation grades often do not exceed R, but good quality mutton may be had from an upland breed with P classification. However, value of meat yield against carcass cost should be considered.



Slaughter and Butchery

Slaughter

Minimising stress is vitally important for the resulting quality of the meat. Reducing numbers of journeys and their duration, as well as good handling in the abattoir helps reduce stress levels.

Chilling/hanging

Natural maturing of meat through hanging brings better flavour and a more tender texture. The period of hanging will depend on carcass fat levels, but periods of at least 10 days are recommended.

Butchering

Butchering and cuts of mutton are very similar to those of lamb. Current regulations require the splitting of carcasses, so saddle of mutton, once a popular joint, is no longer possible. Regional variations in the popularity of particular cuts can be found. Cuts are generally larger than for lamb.

Shoulders, either as half or whole, boned and rolled or on the bone are still popular.

Diced mutton is in good demand for its versatility, and shoulders are the best source, especially in a fat carcass, where the fat can be removed.

Loins are popular joints, on or off the bone, and mutton chops are still widely sold. Loin fillets are popular with some cooks for faster cooking.



Legs are still a favourite roasting joint, although with smaller families, the half leg or smaller mini-joint are more popular than the once ubiquitous whole leg. Legs joints can be on or off the bone.

Neck is popular for stews, such as Lancashire Hotpot.

Mince can be used in a variety of easily prepared meals, sausages or burgers.

Offal can be stronger flavoured than lamb, although heart, kidney and liver can offer a cheap and tasty meal.

