



The truth about spring lamb

Traditional mutton and hogget should be the real stars of the Easter menu. Village Farm's **Rebecca Hosking** explains why to MANOR's food editor, *Anna Turns*.

The sight of cute, white lambs gambolling across green pastures conjures up classic associations with new beginnings familiar to us all at Easter. But is lamb naturally ready to eat in springtime? Shepherdess Rebecca Hosking argues not. She's pioneering a new way of farming with nature in mind on the South Devon coast by Salcombe estuary, producing organic lamb with very little intervention. She's going back to basics, using traditional farming methods without any chemicals or tractors, and perhaps most notably of all, without forced lambing. The Village Farm flock of 350 breeding ewes all come into season naturally once a year: "We tup

our sheep by putting our rams in on 5 November and take them out at New Year, so our first lamb is due on 1 April and we have a two-month period of lambing," explains Rebecca, who goes by the old farming calendar. Normally, ewes would get pregnant in the autumn for four months, and lambs would be born in the spring, then ready to eat by the autumn.

Most modern sheep farmers tailor their timings around the peak season for lamb at Easter, but this springtime boom is somewhat artificial, and Rebecca sheds some light on when this first began: "In Victorian times, the 'improvers' were a group of gentlemen agriculturalists who improved the breeds. One breed,

the Dorset, bred out of season, perhaps because just one ewe had a weird gene that meant it bred outside of the traditional season. The Victorians had this mad craze crossing Dorsets with all the other breeds to get them to breed out of season and thus enabling people to eat lamb in the spring.”

This has resulted in lambs being born in October then fed grain throughout the winter, housed inside and fattened up to be ready in time for the Easter market. “Lamb itself is a very modern dish, and in fact, even back in the 1900s, it is all about mutton dishes, but these days it is possible to buy milk-fed lambs which haven’t yet even been weaned onto grass,” says Rebecca. “We define lamb as up to one year old, hogget is between one and two years, and prize mutton is anything up to six years old.”

In 2004, HRH Prince Charles launched his Mutton Renaissance campaign in order to spark an interest in one of the nation’s long-forgotten favourite dishes. It used to be more popular than beef, so what changed?

Rebecca explains that before the Second World War, male sheep called ‘wethers’ were kept to an older age for their fleeces (wethers had better-quality fleeces than females because hormone changes during pregnancy made the wool more brittle). “So these wethers were kept for longer as the price of the wool was so high, and as a result, they were not killed for meat until they reached an older age – hence, prize mutton.” South Devon, where Rebecca farms today, was a huge wool trade area. Towns like Kingsbridge, Modbury and Totnes were all built on the wool trade. “When my dad was young he remembers when the wool cheque paid for the farm, and anything else you produced was a bonus, and most of the big Georgian houses in this area were wool merchants’ houses,” says Rebecca.

But then came the arrival of petrochemicals and manmade fibres such as nylon, so in the 1950s and 1960s, wool prices crashed. “Financially it wasn’t worth keeping on these old wethers, so sheep were killed earlier, and this was when lamb got trendy,” she says. “Farmers started speeding up the production of their animals because they wanted them to fatten up in one year. Gone were the days when sheep would be slow grown to hogget or mutton; you didn’t want to overwinter an animal because you had to feed it grain and house it indoors, and that costs money.”

Hogget and mutton are a lot more old-fashioned, so it isn’t financially viable to produce these older meats unless the animals are entirely fed grass. So Rebecca is fundamentally working with the seasons, rearing a hardy breed of low-profile sheep that suit this exposed and wild coastal environment all year round. Together, she and her business partner Tim Green have developed an alternative way of farming hand-in-hand with nature. Originally trained as a BBC wildlife camerawoman, Rebecca’s work took her across the world and she

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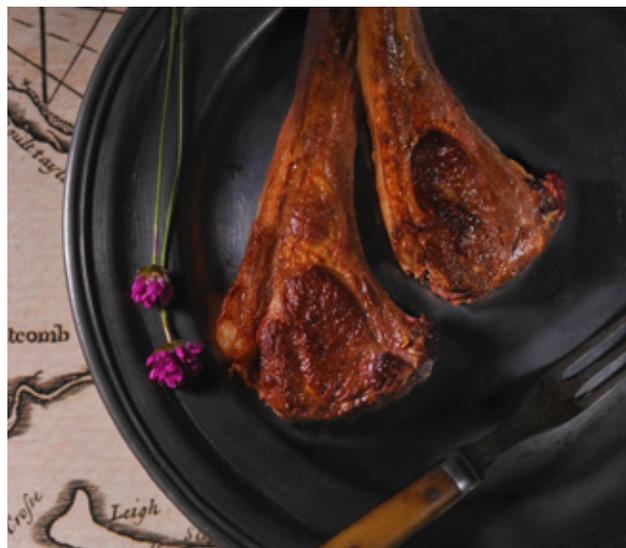
As my dad said, a hundred years ago farmers were biologists, today they are chemists, and we are going back to being biologists.



The Village Farm philosophy is holistic, considering every aspect of each animal’s life and that of the land Rebecca and Tim steward



Coastal plants like sea thrift are part of the flock’s totally natural diet



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We see the salt crystals on the pastures and sometimes we even have the sea froth getting blown up the cliffs, so the salt takes away the bitterness and the meat seems sweeter.



was shocked by how much agriculture had devastated precious habitats. She left the BBC in 2008 and worked on her father’s conventional farms near Modbury until she moved to Village Farm three years ago.

Three things set Village Farm apart from other farms here in the UK. Firstly, Rebecca is the only one of the team from Devon farming stock. “I work with a group of environmental specialists – they all have ‘ologies’. We have a zoologist, two ecologists, a marine biologist and an agro-ecologist. Working on our farm is all about the biology of the land.” Secondly, she views her domestic and wild stock as part of the same ecosystem: “As my dad said, a hundred years ago farmers were biologists, today they are chemists, and we are going back to being biologists,” she explains. “There are wildlife-friendly farms but they tend to have separate wildlife areas and areas for food production. We step back – our human needs are not the only needs on the farm, so when skylarks are nesting, we pull out of those fields to allow them to breed; when orchids are growing in the bottom meadows, we don’t throw the sheep in, we allow them to go to seed.” Lastly, the key is to sharing the productivity of the farm. “We have planted 800 fruit trees but not with the intention that we will take all the fruit. The top ones go to the birds, the bottom ones drop off and go to the wildlife, and we take the middle ones,” says Rebecca, whose philosophy is resulting in nutrient-rich soils, and naturally great-tasting meat.

“We see the salt crystals on the pastures and sometimes we even have the sea froth getting blown up the cliffs,” says Rebecca, who explains that the salt actually makes the meat taste sweeter. “Salt takes away the bitterness and the meat seems sweeter to the taste buds on your tongue.”

Because of such high welfare and strong ethics, customers on paleo diets or people trying to improve their gut flora are buying this mutton and hogget, some as far

flung as Scotland and Norfolk, and Rebecca is proud to supply to some high-end restaurants including The Lido in Bristol, Gourmet Goat at Borough Market, Stevie Parle’s Craft London and, more locally, The Journey’s End Inn at Ringmore and Café ODE at Gara Rock.

“The breeding in Victorian times was driven by the industrial revolution, so we are reinventing the wheel by going back to what will naturally survive those environmental elements,” says Rebecca. “The traditional rare British breeds are the ones that suit our landscape best, so we breed from sheep from the Shetland Islands that weren’t interfered with by the improvers in Victorian times.” Today at Village Farm, Rebecca and her team are breeding for health, and with that, the high-quality fleece, delicious meat and thriving biodiversity follow. **M**

To order a meat box or for information about Village Farm’s pop-up dining events this summer, go to village.farm

TASTE THE DIFFERENCE

Lamb (up to one year old) is to mutton like veal is to aged beef. It has the lightest, most delicate flavour, and it is easy to cook.

Hogget (one to two years old) has the tenderness of lamb but it has a richer flavour. You can overcook it, so try slow roasting a shoulder for the most amazing flavours, or cook a rack of hogget for 15 minutes in the oven, then let it stand for five minutes.

Mutton (over two years old) makes delicious stews, with a richer, denser and slightly gamier flavour. You can cook good renaissance mutton that is traditionally reared and has been hung for three weeks rare just as you would a 28-day aged beef steak.

In loving memory of Tim Green 22.11.74 – 10.02.17

Old South Hams mutton

Recipe by Emma Olliff at Cliff Veg Market Garden, based at Village Farm

Serves four/five

The sharpness of the crab apples cuts through the beautiful fat marbling the shoulder of mutton. In a slow cooker, the mutton can be done over the course of a day, while you are out at work or off for a wander in the countryside of a Sunday. In the oven, this should take 4-6 hours depending on the size of the shoulder. The cider keeps this dish deliciously moist, so as long as it is cooked at a low temperature, it is very difficult to overcook.

INGREDIENTS

- 1.5kg bone-in mutton shoulder (organic, pasture-fed for life, Village Farm mutton)
- Bunch of fresh thyme
- Sprig of fresh bay leaves
- 150g crab apples (or two tablespoons crab apple jelly or a cooking apple, cored and cut into chunks)
- 1 pint of sweet, organic, Devon cider
- 1 tbsp organic honey
- 1 onion, chopped into eighths
- Salt and pepper
- Olive oil
- Seasonal veg (we used carrots, turnips, leeks, kale tops and potatoes, all from our Cliff Veg Market Garden)

METHOD

Take the meat out the fridge and allow it to come to room temperature. Season the shoulder all over with chopped fresh thyme, Maldon sea salt and cracked black pepper. Preheat the oven to 120°C/100°C fan-assisted/gas ½, or turn the crockpot on to warm.

In a large frying pan, heat a little olive oil with

a sprig of fresh thyme and put in the crab apples, a tablespoon of honey and the onion.

When the pan is really hot, add the shoulder. Do not fiddle with it; to get the perfect golden caramelisation the meat needs constant contact with the base of the pan. Once one side is done, turn it and leave it alone again.

Remove the mutton, the apples, onion and thyme and place in the slow cooker or into an ovenproof dish with a tight-fitting lid.

Place the frying pan back on the heat and deglaze the pan with some of the cider, add a couple of bay leaves, fresh if possible. Pour this and the rest of the cider into the pot with the mutton and cook on low until the meat falls off the bone. Lift out the bones and allow the meat to rest in the juices while you roast the vegetables.

Serve with seasonal vegetables, roasted at 200°C/180°C fan-assisted/gas 6 once the mutton is out of the oven and resting. And, of course, roast potatoes – we roast ours in tallow rendered from the mutton. Toffee crab apples make a good garnish as they give a wonderful sherbet lemon burst of flavour should you fancy it – just fry in butter, with another tablespoon of honey until golden brown and sticky.

