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# Life on the Lamb: From the Paddock to the Plate

*Domestic lamb and its long-established Australian and New Zealand cousins are making a mark on American menus.*

BY KERRY VINCENT

Contrary to popular belief, which has been perpetuated by television ads, Australians do not spend all their time sitting around the barbecue munching on shrimp. To be sure, it's a popular pastime, but lamb reigns supreme as the preferred meat at the daily table.

Lamb is a staple dish all around the world, so perhaps dispelling some of the fiction surrounding this meat will encourage more chefs to experiment and include it in their menu lineup. Where did the fiction begin? Perhaps the American lamb public-relations machine failed to kick in during pioneer days; gunfights ignited over grazing and water rights, and general perceptions were that raising beef was best. Perhaps it was something to do with the passive nature of sheep vs. the more feisty nature of cattle.

Recognizing an opportunity to fill a void on U.S. menus, Australian and New Zealand lamb producers set out to dispel the myths surrounding lamb. They marketed their product vigorously, with the United States as one of the prime targets. The product had a lot going for it. Both Australian and New Zealand lamb are low in fat and cholesterol, sweet-flavored, do not contain additives or artificial growth-hormone promotants, and are antibiotic-free. Free-range lambs spend their short lives grazing on natural pastures of rye and clover and are not subjected to feedlot systems, which usually require artificial supplements.



**Roasted leg of Australian lamb (bone-in) is basted with mustard and rosemary.**

## **Good and good for you**

During the past decade, American chefs have pushed the envelope looking for new ingredients to put on plates, and lamb has been one of them. Whether they choose domestic lamb or its Australian or New Zealand cousin, the end result is to educate more Americans about this sometimes-maligned meat, a win-win for all sides.

Tom Kourlis, chairman of the newly formed American Lamb Board based in Denver, Colo., said the main focus of the group is to launch a campaign to promote American lamb and drive year-round use of various cuts among foodservice professionals and consumers. To this end, the board debuted an American

lamb-tasting event, “Four Seasons—Endless Reasons,” at the Four Seasons Hotel in New York last October. Chefs Jim Botsacos, Pano Karatassos, Melissa Perello and Brooke Vosika were among those who unveiled new seasonal lamb recipes.

Niman Ranch based in Oakland, Calif., hosts educational lamb-ranch picnics, where invited chefs, retailers and consumers dine on lamb dishes and tour the facility and pastures. Common misconceptions are dispelled when the lamb is tasted, and those who arrive thinking they don't like lamb are pleasantly surprised after eating product that has been correctly cooked. A method often used at Niman Ranch picnics is

to dust a boneless leg with garlic powder and seasoned salts, cover, and barbecue-grill for 50 minutes.

Lately, there has been widespread news coverage about obesity in the United States; perhaps lamb is one answer to the diner's prayer. With the U.S. government's current emphasis on lowering fat in the average American's diet, low-fat lamb could be key. A 3-oz serving of topside lamb steak has 5 grams of fat, compared with 8 grams in identical beef and pork cuts and 10 grams in Atlantic salmon. Lamb is lean and low in cholesterol compared with other animal proteins, while 50% of the fat in lamb is monounsaturated. Lamb provides twice as much iron as chicken and pork and six times more than fish. It is also a good source of B-group vitamins, including niacin, thiamin and riboflavin.

### Foreign vs. domestic?

Lamb is defined as being less than 1 year old, with no eruption of permanent teeth, and approximately 12 months or younger at the time of slaughter. Premium lamb from both Australia and New Zealand is shipped daily to North America and is fully approved by the Food and Drug Administration.

New Zealand and Australian lamb is aged using accelerated conditioning and aging, a process that enables it to age rapidly and enhances the tenderness without the use of chemicals. Both domestic and imported product is processed in an environment combining state-of-the-art packaging, strict plant cleanliness, and space-age hygienic conditions. All these factors give fresh lamb a shelf life of 10 to 12 weeks if stored at the optimum temperature of 30°F. Atkins Ranch in Oakland, Calif.,



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Double-cut loin chops star in Chef Brooke Vosika's rosemary-grilled lamb loin chops with cranberry and peppered-apple relish at Four Seasons in New York.



Grilled rack of lamb and summer vegetable salad with a smoky basil and charred-tomato vinaigrette makes a showy summer dish from chef Jim Botsacos of Molyvos in New York.

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Chef Melissa Perello at Charles Nob Hills Restaurant in San Francisco makes a hearty meal of braised lamb with black mission figs.

provides high-quality, fresh, range-reared New Zealand lamb to markets throughout North America and Europe. According to Karen Atkins, sales manager, “The fine molecular structure of the meat is directly related to the fact that lamb is grazed on fresh sweet grass rather than grain-fed, which produces quite a different taste and texture. Free-range lamb is rich in Omega 3 fatty acids, and New Zealand lamb tends to be cleaner, purer and more intensively farmed.”

Domestic lamb comes from animals that also enjoy an intensively farmed, stress-free, hormone-free life, although some may have been subjected to feedlots. American lamb that goes to a feedlot is not fed artificial supplements, however; the feed is typically haylage, a combination of alfalfa and grain/corn. American lambs do not receive hormones, and antibiotics are administered on an as-needed basis.

### Lamb on the menu

Chefs who menu lamb generally favor one source over another. Brandon Thrash, executive chef at The Polo Grill in Tulsa, Okla., prepares a dish using his favorite cut—lamb rack. “Lamb is growing ever so popular in the States these days, and it has also added value to my menu,” he says. “American lamb chops are a bit larger than that of their foreign rivals, and in my restaurant, it is always on the menu.”

Steve Gerkin, a frequent Polo Grill diner, has confidence in the homegrown product. “American lamb offers me a bit more safety,” he says. “I know that it is going to be tender and it has a very pure flavor, so I am confident when entertaining guests.”

Chef Anita Lo at Annisa restaurant in New York has been using Australian lamb for more than seven years and considers herself a fan.

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“Australian lamb is hugely versatile—full-bodied, but not overpowering—and it is always tender,” she says. “Chops are the most-expensive cut, but good things can be made from the less-expensive shanks and shoulder.” She says there is no preparation or waste in the kitchen, because the product arrives perfectly trimmed and portioned. “The taste and ease of preparation cannot be compared,” she says. Grilled Australian lamb tenderloins with curried golden raisins is so popular with her diners that she recently served a record 37 covers in one sitting—in a space that seats just 45.

Lamb can replace beef in many basic recipes; simply adjust or change the seasoning and reduce the cooking times. The flavor of lamb is mild and delicate and partners well with herbs and spices such as mint and rosemary, as well as cumin, cilantro, harissa and tarragon, or ingredients such as coffee, vanilla and honey. Flavor of the product changes depending on where it is farmed; variables that affect the taste include climate, soil, the type of grain or grass consumed, and the environment.

So what is lamb’s future on the American menu? Frankie Whitman, who is in the marketing and public-relations department at Niman Ranch, says, “After the bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) scare earlier this year, the industry saw a lot of chefs switch from beef to lamb.” And, she says, “Like the beef industry, the once-discarded cuts of lamb are in great demand. Denver ribs [the equivalent of spare ribs] and lamb shanks are two products we have a hard time keeping in stock. Chefs enjoy the challenge of taking these cuts and creating unusual recipes.” Whitman recom-

The following Web sites offer information, a list of retailers and their locations, and lamb recipes:

- [www.americanlambboard.org](http://www.americanlambboard.org)
- [www.atkinsranch.com](http://www.atkinsranch.com)
- [www.australian-lamb.com](http://www.australian-lamb.com)
- [www.californialamb.com](http://www.californialamb.com)
- [www.foodcomm.com](http://www.foodcomm.com)
- [www.lambinfo.com](http://www.lambinfo.com)
- [www.marketnewzealand.com](http://www.marketnewzealand.com)
- [www.newzealandlamb.org](http://www.newzealandlamb.org)
- [www.nimanranch.com](http://www.nimanranch.com)
- [www.wildeats.com](http://www.wildeats.com)

mends rare cooking methods for ribs and loin. Cuts such as the shoulder and leg should be well-cooked for tender eating.

Lamb also lends itself to charcoal grilling, which enhances the meat’s

flavor. Chef John McGannon of Wildeats Enterprises in San Francisco combines garlic, salt, pepper, lemon peel, rosemary and mint, rubs it into the meat, and cooks it over a mesquite grill.

Statistics show that foodservice usage of lamb has increased more than 50% in the past five years. A separate study indicates consumers are drawn to restaurants that serve lamb. Today available in many traditional and new value-added cuts to fit every restaurant’s profile and needs, lamb benefits from diner perception of it as an “upscale” protein. As a result, lamb as a menu partner has the power to enhance the image of any operation. □

*Kerry Vincent is based in Tulsa, Okla.*

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