

Chefs on the Lamb: Low Cuts, High

Bo Peep loses them in a nursery rhyme, insomniacs count them, and renegade family members are labeled as black ones. Sheep have been a cultural icon for millennia and their lamb a mainstay of menus around the globe for even longer. Grilled loin chops and roasted racks, crusted with herbs and garlic, can be found everywhere that Mary went, but some of the less frequently used cuts are the ones that are now creating the real buzz and bleats in professional kitchens.

“Ten to fifteen years ago we couldn’t sell lamb shanks. Now, we can’t keep them,” reports supplier John Jamison of Jamison Farm in Latrobe, Pennsylvania. “Lamb sales have risen sharply in the last two years, especially the lower meats. They are such a profitable item. Now, I’m seeing more and more interest in shoulder.”

Chef Jeremy Bearman, of Lark Creek Steak in San Francisco, found that replacing the loin lamb chops on his menu with shanks actually increased sales. Considering the higher margin for this item, it was a very profitable move. Bearman, like many chefs around the country, has learned that so-called lesser lamb cuts often mean more value for the restaurant.

Once upon a Ranch

One of the first animals to be domesticated, sheep have provided meat, milk, and three bags full for more than 10,000 years. Even in America, shepherds far outnumbered ranchers and cowboys up until the late nineteenth century, when the growing beef

A large, raw piece of lamb meat is the central focus, resting on a light-colored cutting board. The meat is pinkish-red with visible marbling and a layer of fat. A sharp knife with a wooden handle lies on the board in the foreground, angled towards the left. The background is softly blurred, showing more of the meat and the cutting board. The word "Returns" is overlaid in a large, elegant, serif font on the left side of the image.

Returns

industry, with its strong political connections, two-fisted public relations campaigns, and armies of hired gunslingers, drove the “hoofed locusts” off the open range. The popularity of lamb continued to dwindle through World War I, when the government launched a campaign to produce more wool by discouraging lamb consumption. But today, the American lamb industry is once again thriving, with 6.5 million sheep grazing on 64,000 ranches. Moreover, imports of lamb from New Zealand and Australia are strong commodities in the culinary trade.

Only meat from a sheep that is younger than one year old can be classified as lamb. Because of this distinction, lamb is nearly always more tender than similar cuts from other animals. It has a unique texture that Chef Jacques Reymond, of Jacques Reymond Restaurant, just outside Melbourne, Australia, de-

scribes as “the most natural.” According to Garry McAlister, trade marketing manager for Meat & Livestock Australia Ltd. (australian-lamb.com), lamb from Down Under headed for the United States has a texture advantage simply by virtue of its journey. “Our product is vacuum-packed and chilled for export to the States, allowing the product to ‘age’ during transit. This really improves tenderness, similar to the results achieved from dry aging of beef. It’s a better-quality product that arrives.”

Lamb also has a unique flavor profile, says Chris Yeo, chef of Straits Restaurant in San Francisco and Sino Restaurant & Lounge in San Jose: “It has a depth and a certain richness unlike other red meats. Lamb is not stronger than beef, just different. But depending on its region of origin, age of slaughter, and what it is fed, the flavor profile of lamb can vary considerably.” Because



Australian and New Zealand lamb is grazed on grass, it has a more pronounced flavor than most commercial American lamb, which is usually weaned to grain, then hay, and finally fed a formulated feed of sorghum, wheat, and vitamins.

Many boutique US lamb producers, however, such as Jamison Farm (jamisonfarm.com), stand by the grass-grazing model with the belief that it yields a better tasting, healthier product. Jamison and his wife and partner, Sukey, graze their flock on the local grass and white clover, switching to hay only in the middle of winter, and only when necessary. Jamison's animals are sold when small and lean, generally when three to six months old and ranging from 35 to 50 pounds. Feed-fed Colorado lambs, by contrast, can weigh in at 60 to 85 pounds.

At Shuttleworth Farm in Westfield, Vermont (shuttleworthfarm.com), the sheep are 100 percent grass-fed with organic hay in the winter and daily foraging in paddocks of fresh grass the remainder of the year. Eric Warnstedt, chef/owner of Hen Of The Wood restaurant in Waterbury, Vermont, describes Shuttleworth's lamb as "the most beautiful product I've seen. We pre-pay the farm for premium lamb cuts so we can be guaranteed a supply. Otherwise, they end up in New York City." It's ironic, he adds, "that there's more Vermont lamb sold in Manhattan than in Vermont."

Other small East-Coast grass-fed lamb producers are Jamie Nicoll of Summerfield Farms in Culpepper, Virginia (800-898-3276), and Kathy MacLean of Far Away Farm in Ashfield, Massachusetts (413-628-3365), who started selling Dorset lambs, fed on grass and rowan (sweet second-cutting hay), throughout the Northeast this spring.

At Niman Ranch's (nimanranch.com) western facilities, flocks graze on clover in California and wildflowers in Utah. All its lamb is finished on corn and alfalfa to mellow the flavor. In Healdsburg, California, Bruce Campbell of C K Lamb (707-431-8161) is one of the first ranchers to offer chefs Spring lamb for Easter menus since his newborn flocks can graze on filaree—an annual grass that starts sprouting amid cold and fog early in the year, well before other grasses. (Young lambs grow quicker on pasture than on mother's milk.) Campbell's product is special-ordered by chefs in Las Vegas and California.

Shoulder to Shank

Lamb shanks are one of the hottest items on modern menus. Because they are a part of the animal that gets so much exercise, shanks develop exceptional flavor. This cut also contains lots of soft cartilage and connective tissue that break down to a luscious, gelatinous consistency when slow-cooked. Shank is typically braised, but it can also be sealed in a Cryovac and cooked sous vide in a recirculator. Corporate Chef Roland Henin, of Delaware North Companies, remarks that "shanks practically cook themselves . . . and the collagen in slow-simmered lamb gives you terrific moisture without a lot of fat." For the multiple operations that Henin oversees, which range from white-tablecloth venues to cafeterias, lamb is sourced both domestically and from Australia, depending on the style of operation. "American lamb from Sonoma, Colorado, and Washington is generally used in our fine-dining restaurants," he reports. "Australian lamb comes already prepped, so it requires less skill in the kitchen."

Leg is another popular cut, but it shouldn't be limited to simple roasting. A lamb leg can be "taken down" just like a leg of veal, then trimmed into individual muscle groups to be grilled or pounded into cutlets. The top round can also be sliced into steaks. Meat from the leg is perfect for shish kabobs, or *shashlik*, as they are more commonly called in Central Asia. At the Bhukaran-Uzbeki restaurant Salute, located in Rego Park, New York, the cooks grill *shashlik* of leg, rib, breast meat, and *zhasb*, or lamb cracklings, and serve everything on

Braised Lamb Shanks

by Michael Gover, executive chef,
Yosemite Lodge at the Falls, California*

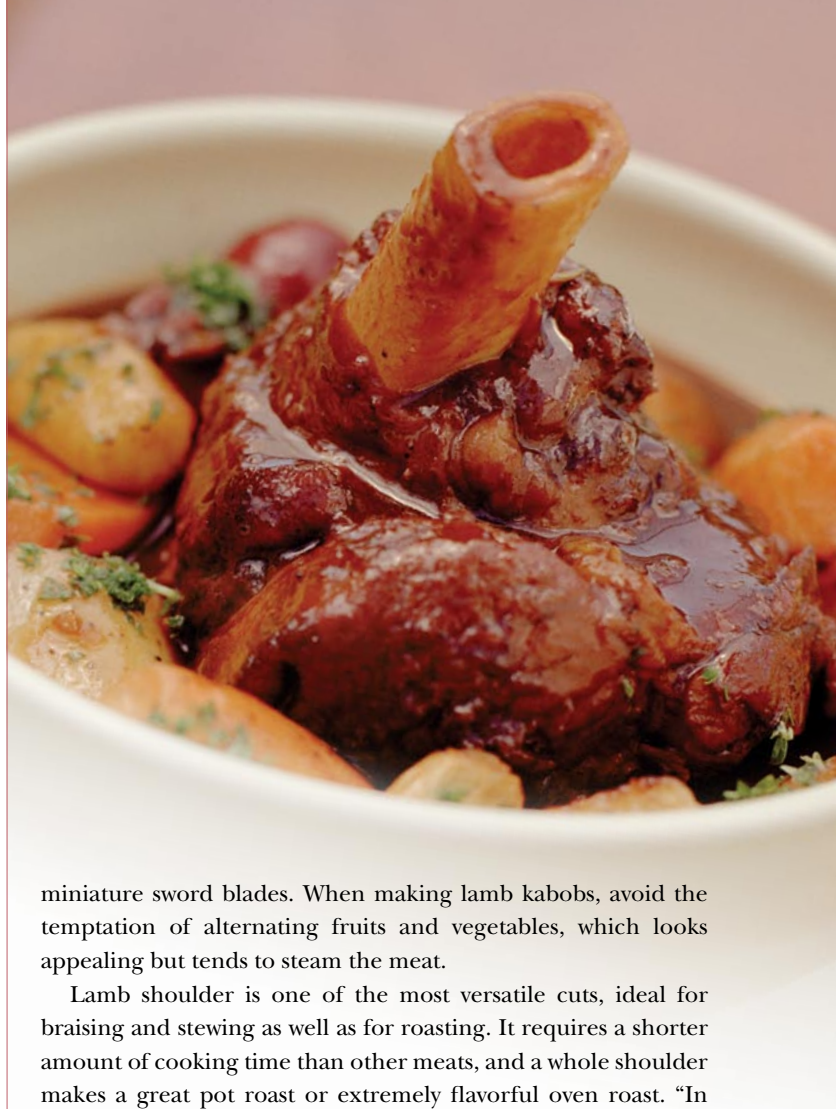
Yield: 4 servings

Olive oil	1 Tbsp
Lamb foreshanks	4
Salt and pepper	to taste
Peeled and diced onion	1 cup
Diced celery	½ cup
Diced carrots	½ cup
Garlic cloves, finely chopped	4
Tomato paste	1 Tbsp
Peeled and thickly sliced navel orange	1
Fresh rosemary	1 sprig
Fresh thyme	1 sprig
Bay leaf	1
Veal or beef stock	3 cups
Red wine	1 cup
Orange juice	1 cup
Water	½ cup
Grand Marnier	2 oz
Cornstarch	2 Tbsp

1. Heat oven to 300°F. Heat oil in braising pan. Season lamb shanks thoroughly with salt and pepper. Sear all sides of shanks in hot oil until golden brown. Remove from pan and reserve until needed.
2. Make mirepoix, adding onion, celery, carrot, and garlic to hot pan and cooking until onions are wilted and carrots begin to brown along the edges. Add tomato paste, orange slices, rosemary, thyme, and bay leaf. Cook briefly, being careful not to burn the tomato paste.
3. Set shanks on top of mirepoix and add stock, wine, and orange juice, submerging shanks halfway in liquid. Cover and cook in oven 3 to 4 hours or until meat can be pulled away with a fork. Remove shanks and hold warm until ready to serve.
4. Strain cooking liquid into smaller saucepan. Skim the fat. Add additional beef or veal stock, if necessary, to equal 2 cups. Mix water, Grand Marnier, and cornstarch. Bring cooking liquid to a boil over medium-high heat. Stir cornstarch mixture into boiling sauce and cook for 5 minutes, stirring frequently, until sauce thickens. Season with salt and pepper and serve hot over shanks.

*Recipe is reprinted from the new cookbook *Pathways to Plate*, published by Delaware North Companies and featuring the contributions of chefs within the multiunit restaurant group.

■ A suggested pairing for the lamb dish is Rodney Strong 2001 Meritage *Symmetry*, Alexander Valley, California



miniature sword blades. When making lamb kabobs, avoid the temptation of alternating fruits and vegetables, which looks appealing but tends to steam the meat.

Lamb shoulder is one of the most versatile cuts, ideal for braising and stewing as well as for roasting. It requires a shorter amount of cooking time than other meats, and a whole shoulder makes a great pot roast or extremely flavorful oven roast. “In Europe, the shoulder roast, called *gigot*, is very popular,” Henin states, “and considered as good, if not better, than the leg roast. The neck and shoulder definitely have the most flavor.”

New Zealand chef Peter Gordon bakes shoulder and serves it on a gratin of sweet potato. Meat from the shoulder and neck are also ideal ground for burgers. Bearman grinds shoulder and seasons it with Moroccan spices for *merquez* meatballs that he serves with loin chops.

Part Time

Lamb’s variety cuts, otherwise known as organ meats, have esoteric appeal and can add culinary intrigue, wonderful textures, and surprisingly good flavors to many dishes. Lamb kidney remains very popular in Europe, and even in the States loin chops were once sold with the kidney still attached, although the USDA no longer permits this. Stuffed loin with fried sweetbreads and sauteed kidney is a signature dish of Chef Neil McFadden, who until recently served them at Luttrellistown Castle, outside of Dublin, Ireland. Lamb kidneys are the mildest-tasting kidneys and need no soaking. When buying, look for a fresh, glossy appearance.

For Jacques Reynaud, “the brain is the sweetest part of the lamb. It has the most unusual texture.” He serves lamb brains with a papillote of slippery mushrooms on a warm salad of arugula and baby spinach with roasted hazelnuts, “because the



Mediterranean Lamb Burger with Goat Cheese and Tomato Relish

Courtesy of the Australian Lamb Commission
(australianlamb.com)

Yield: 4 burgers

Burgers:

Ground Australian lamb	1¾ lb
Shallot, peeled and chopped	1
Capers, chopped	1 Tbsp
Large basil leaves, sliced	6 to 8
Freshly ground pepper	to taste
Cornmeal	½ cup

Tomato Relish:

Ripe tomatoes, halved	3
Red onion, thickly sliced	1
Sugar	1 tsp
Balsamic vinegar	1 tsp
Salt and pepper	to taste
Hamburger buns or rolls, halved	4
Soft goat cheese	4 Tbsp

1. To make burgers, combine lamb, shallot, capers, basil, and pepper, mixing well. Shape mixture into four burgers. Spread cornmeal on a plate; press both sides of each burger in cornmeal to coat. Set aside.
2. To make tomato relish, grill tomatoes, cut side down, for 20 seconds. Flip and cook until skin starts to char. Grill red onion slices until soft. Finely dice grilled tomato and onion; mix with sugar and vinegar. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Set aside.
3. To serve, grill burger bun halves to lightly toast. Spread bottom half of each bun with goat cheese. Grill burgers and place atop goat cheese. Top with tomato relish and remaining bun halves.

♦ A bottle of Navarro Correas 2005 Malbec *Coleccion Privada*, Mendoza, Argentina would be an ideal pairing with the lamb burger.

hazelnut is the most subtle of all the nuts and has the flavor of burnt butter,” a classic match for brains. To balance the richness of the brains, he finishes the dish with baby capers and balsamic vinegar.

Bearman makes a salad with lamb tongue, but he admits that it is an acquired taste. Lamb tongue requires peeling, which is easier to do while the meat is still warm. Bearman suggests using sanitation gloves to facilitate this prep work.

No discussion of variety meats would be complete without a mention of lamb fries, also called *animelles* or, in lamb-country vernacular, Rocky Mountain oysters. Most recipes call for removing the membranes, chilling until almost frozen, then slicing, breading, and deep frying. But at least one classic recipe for “Ranch Fry” calls for simply “tossing the balls on a hot iron stove until they explode”—a sure sign of doneness.

Of all the recipes for lamb offal, none is more notorious than haggis, the Scottish dish of whole sheep stomach stuffed with an assortment of innards. Today, because of trepidations about offal and health department regulations limiting which organ meats are acceptable for human consumption, most haggis has been reduced to an unremarkable meat loaf cooked in a waxed paper casing that’s been imprinted with graphics of a sheep’s innards.

Try It, You’ll Like It

From prunes to pomegranates and mint to marjoram, lamb goes with an infinite number of seasonings and ingredients. In Poland, it is commonly served with tart cowberries. At Blu Restaurant, just outside of London, the Lamb Shank Xacoti is sauced with coconut, cinnamon, and poppy seeds. Chef Ian Churamakittichai, of Kittichai restaurant in Manhattan, braises shanks with Thai cardamom and curry. It’s a list that could go on forever. But even with so many ways to dress up lamb, chefs in certain markets still have to contend with significant public resistance to ordering the meat. A common complaint is that consumers are turned off by the “lamby” odor. Although mutton, which is the meat of an older sheep, does have a telltale smell, today’s young lamb meat is virtually free of any scent. As McAlister notes, “Australian lamb is really a clean slate of flavor. Chefs can create their own expression of the product.” Moreover, lamb offers consumers a wholesome red-meat choice that is typically all-natural, free of artificial additives, antibiotics, and growth hormones.

Nonetheless, McAlister reports, “70 percent of Americans have never even tasted lamb.” He believes that getting consumers to try different lamb cuts is a worthwhile priority for any restaurant concerned with plate cost and menu diversity. “But it’s easiest to sell lamb when it’s featured as an appetizer, as a small plate course, or on a bar menu,” he claims. “Then the guests don’t have much to risk. And once they try it,” McAlister enthuses, “they’re often quite surprised by how much they enjoy it.”

► Wayne Harley Brachman is a pastry chef and the author of *Retro Desserts*, *American Desserts*, and *See Dad Cook* (2006). He has run the pastry departments of Mesa Grill, Bolo, Strip House, and Arizona 206 in Manhattan and has been the host of the Food Network’s *Melting Pot* and a regular on *Sweet Dreams*.