

# What You Didn't Know about **Lamb** ...and your textbook might not tell you

By Katie Ayoub

## 1. Let me see your I.D.

The United States Department of Agriculture identifies lamb as the meat of sheep that is under 12 months. Yearlings (much less popular in foodservice) are two to three years old, and mutton is any poor old sheep past the age of three. Mutton was once served as a peasant dish, and in England, still is. Braised or stewed for hours to tenderize it, mutton's flavor is much stronger than lamb's.

## 2. Where's that lamb from?

New Zealand lamb is known for its rich, mild texture; Australian for its flavor; and American lamb for its coarser texture, beefier taste and larger size. Domestic lamb hails primarily from Colorado and Washington, but Texas, California and Pennsylvania also raise lamb. Virginia boasts many artisan lamb producers concentrating on quality. While North Americans eat the rack, leg and shanks, elsewhere people consume every part of the carcass, including the whole roasted head, the brains, kidneys, heart and even lungs. Indeed, an Icelandic delicacy is lamb's testicles.

## 3. Who's eating lamb?

Although it is not the most popular of red meats in this country, diners do seek out lamb. As chefs grow more sophisticated in preparation, diners grow more interested in lamb consumption. Also, with an increase of immigrants from lamb-loving places such as the Middle East and India, demand is on the rise.



Australian Lamb

## 4. "Slam in the lamb."

So many cuts, so much time. Years ago, an ad campaign in Britain urged people to "slam in the lamb," touting its ease of cookery. For home cooks, certainly the leg of lamb is probably the most popular. It comes from the hindquarter and can be rolled and tied, butterflied, boned, cubed (for kebabs) or prepared whole. The loin of lamb comes from the middle, lower section of the rear quarter. The loin is usually divided into loin chops and lamb tenderloin. A lamb loin can be boned, rolled and tied or cut into loin chops. The rack of lamb comes from the front/middle section of the lamb. Rib chops are individual or double chops cut from the rack. The rack is from the beginning of the lamb saddle through the full eye muscle. The shoulder of the lamb, derived from the forequarter, is the most economical cut. It is most suitable for long, slow, moist cook-

ing to tenderize it. Lamb shoulder is often used for stew and casseroles. Ground lamb often comes from the shoulder. Lamb shanks come from the latter part of the leg and are best roasted or braised to elicit the juices from the bone. Shanks are almost always cooked in liquid, at length, until the meat starts separating from the bone.

## 5. Behold! Nutrition.

Lamb is lean and low in cholesterol compared to other animal proteins. In fact, half of the fat in lamb is mono-unsaturated, the same type of fatty acids found in olive oil. For instance, a 3-ounce serving of top-side lamb steak has only five grams of fat. Lamb provides two times more iron than chicken or pork and six times more than fish.

## 6. What's cooking?

At Ristorante Geranio in Alexandria, Va., chef/owner Tray Clayton menus a braised lamb

shank with garlic and rosemary flageolet beans. Mongolian barbecued lamb ribs with roasted shiitake mushrooms and truffle aioli are on executive chef/owner Cindy Pawlcy's menu at Mustard's Grill in Yountville, Calif. Marcus Samuelsson, chef at New York's Aquavit, makes an Ethiopian lamb stew, called *tibs*, that features lamb loin, turmeric and cardamom. At the Herbfarm Restaurant in Woodinville, Wash., executive chef Jerry Traunfeld encrusts a rack of lamb with herbs, serving it with a parsley, mint and walnut sauté.

## 7. Dolly was a little lamb.

In February 1996, scientists announced they had successfully cloned a mammal, producing a lamb named Dolly. She quickly gained infamy and sat in the middle of a swirling ethics debate on cloning. She died in February 2003. ■