Mutton Tastes Really Bad! Right?

—Ulf Kintzel

Mutton. Fewer terms in the world of food have a worse connotation than the word mutton. It is a term that describes the meat from older sheep, at least older than one year of age. How did it get such a bad reputation? Large quantities of canned mutton were shipped and fed to American soldiers in the Second World War. After they returned from the war, many refused to eat lamb or mutton ever again at home. They shaped a whole generation that way. Yes, indeed, the greatest generation that secured freedom for the western world by defeating the Nazis and Japan is also largely responsible for the bad reputation of mutton. They were not wrong, though.

In addition, the wool industry started collapsing in the 1950s and 1960s with the development of synthetic fibers, which made the need for large volumes of wool obsolete. At the same time, beef production was scaled up significantly and beef became cheaper. (Yes, you heard right, beef became cheaper.)

If you go a little farther back in history, there were the Sheep and Cattle Wars of the late 19th and early 20th century between cattle ranchers and sheepmen in the American West. The cattle ranchers won. Beef became part of the American culture and still is. Eating lamb, let alone mutton, is not so much part of the American culture as it is in many other parts of the world.

I have been raising and eating lamb and sheep for more than 40 years. Even I have to say that I don't blame anyone for refusing to eat the meat from an old, grain-fed wool sheep. I too find it offensively tasting. When hair sheep gained popularity in the United States and I was still raising Texel sheep, I heard many times that the meat of adult hair sheep, be it Dorper sheep or Katahdin sheep or any other hair sheep, is milder in taste. I was *certain* this was pure sales talk. I was certain until I tried mutton from a crossbred White Dorper sheep. It was indeed true that the meat was milder in taste. There wasn't any resemblance of the strong-tasting mutton I have come to experience.

Why is that? You might think it is because hair sheep are often grass-fed or at least pasture-raised sheep. They are certainly not raised in feedlots. This accounts only in small part for the taste difference. I am aware from personal experience that mutton from a grass-fed wool sheep still has plenty of strong flavor. I have been told that the lanolin in the wool of wool sheep causes the off flavor of mutton. In fact, the strongest tasting lamb roast I have ever eaten was the neck roast of a Merino lamb. Merino sheep have the finest wool on earth and with it comes the highest amount of lanolin. In line with that claim is the fact that the meat of sheep breeds with very coarse wool is milder in flavor. Icelandic sheep are such an example. So is a German sheep breed called Heidschnucken, a breed of sheep with extremely coarse wool. Coarse wool equals less lanolin. I am aware that I am repeating hearsay, but that is an explanation supported by anecdotal evidence.

For our family's personal consumption, I have butchered cull ewes, often seven or eight or even nine years old right after they raised their lambs. Then they are leaner than at other times of the year. While they still have some fat cover, they don't have excessive fat layers. They make excellent ground meat and wonderfully juicy stew meat. We, as a family, have been eating sheep meat from old cull ewes for as long as I have raised White Dorper sheep. That is now more than 20 years. It has replaced the need for any beef (except for the occasional Delmonico steak) and any pork (except for the occasional pork bacon). In fact, all my children as well as my wife prefer a mutton burger over a beef burger, and even over a lamb burger.

While I can't change the outcome of the Sheep and Cattle Wars or the bad experiences of American GIs in WWII, perhaps I can initiate some gain in the reputation of mutton with these two favorite recipes of mine. Remember, whenever I reference "sheep" or "mutton," I am talking about the meat from a grass-fed

Photos by Author

adult White Dorper ewe that has reached the end of its productive life. These are my recipes for a family of five:



Sauerbraten over Spätzle served with red cabbage.

Sauerbraten. This is a very German dish. Literally translated, it means sour roast. Yet, it really isn't sour at all. It is our middle child's favorite dish. Just like goulash, you will find many different recipes published. Many of them include marinating in part with vinegar. My recipe, which the wife of a German friend of mine gave me, excludes vinegar to avoid the sour part in Sauerbraten.



Marinating Sauerbraten

Cubed sheep meat, three pounds
Red table wine (for cooking purposes, a gallon jug of domestic Burgundy will do just fine)
Peppercorns
Juniper berries (optional)
Onion, one small or one half of a large onion
Garlic, two to four cloves
Bay leaves, two or three
Salt
Flour

We use a porcelain dish with a glass lid to marinate the meat. We add the meat, the wine, peppercorns and juniper berries, garlic, and onion. Make sure the meat is covered with the wine. Do not add salt at this time! Put the dish in the fridge for two to three days and let it marinate.

We prepare Sauerbraten in a slow cooker. We purchased a slow cooker that includes a feature that allows us to brown/sauté the meat right in the cooker instead of having to use a separate pot. That is a wonderful feature. We remove the meat from the marinating dish and brown it in the cooker. Towards the end of the process, we mix in two tablespoons of flour, which will eventually thicken the gravy. We then add the wine through a strainer. Most peppercorns and especially the juniper berries, have done their part by now and don't need to be cooked with the dish. The onion, bay leaves, and garlic are added, too. So is salt, to your liking.

I know that many of my readers in *Farming Magazine* are Plain people, who do not consume alcohol. Here is what happens with alcohol (which is ethanol) during cooking: Since we prepare the Sauerbraten in a slow cooker, cook with the lid ajar some of the time, and cook the dish for 6 to 8 hours, the alcohol (ethanol) basically evaporates, and virtually no intoxicating or unhealthy components remain. All that's left is the flavor. Then why do we cook with wine in the first place if the alcohol is all gone when the dish is done? Well, because of the flavor!

We serve Sauerbraten over a homemade egg pasta dish called Spätzle. It is a Swabian dish and a nod to my five years of living in that part of Germany as a young boy. It requires a special spätzle press to make them, but they can also be purchased dried and ready to be cooked. You can also substitute them with your choice of pasta. What vegetable goes with it? Traditionally, red cabbage is the vegetable of choice for Sauerbraten.

Goulash. The original goulash dish is Hungarian and is made with cubed beef. There are many different recipes, originating from many European countries.

Cubed sheep meat, three pounds
Black pepper, ground
Sweet paprika, about a teaspoon
Slightly spicy peppers, amount to your liking
Onion, one small or half of a large onion
Garlic, two to four cloves
A quart of pure, not spiced, tomato sauce or a few teaspoons of tomato paste
Salt
Flour

We often add mushrooms like shiitake (which I grow) or meadow mushrooms, or horse mushrooms, or chanterelle mushrooms, which we forage. It then becomes what is called in German a Pilzgulasch (mushroom goulash).

I will also let you in on a little secret ingredient that my late mother always added, which I have passed on to my wife and children. You just need to promise not to tell and keep it a secret as well. My mother always added a splash of brine from homemade cucumbers-in-brine and then a small and finely cubed brined pickle to the goulash. I don't know who taught her that (I assume her mother) or maybe she came up with it, but it adds incredible flavor to the dish.



Goulash soup with shiitake.

Goulash is either served over pasta or potatoes. If served as a main dish, red cabbage is again the vegetable of choice. However, it can also be served as a soup. When we serve it as a soup, we add finely cubed potatoes to the dish for the last half hour of cooking time. It can then also be served with a splash of sour cream in it.

One more word about the peppers: Goulash is supposed to have some spice. After all, it is a Hungarian dish. We use slightly spicy peppers to give it that spice. Ultimately, it is a personal choice. Make it as spicy as you wish by using jalapeño peppers or not spicy at all by using bell peppers. Or you can skip the peppers and use just paprika instead. A German saying states: *Die Königin der Kochrezepte ist die Phantasie.* (The queen of all recipes is your imagination.)

Guten Appetit!

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