

Contents

Foreword	ix	The Vikings	37
Introduction	x	Middle Ages	37
		Land Enclosures	39
		The Highland Clearances	42
		Consequences of the Enclosures	44
		Sheep Numbers	45
		Demand and Supply for Sheep Meat	46
		Mutton and the New World	48
		New Zealand	49
		South Africa	52
		Australia	54
		USA	56
		Sheep and the Landscape	58
		Sheep on the Hills and Mountains	58
		Hefts and Hirsels	59
		Hills, Ticks, Sheep, People and Grouse	62
		Sheep on the Downs	62
		Sheep on Lowland Arable Farms	62
		Shepherding	65
		Counting Sheep	73
		Names of Sheep	75
		Shepherd's Equipment	77
		Crook	77
		Shepherd's Smock	78
		Shepherd's Gaiters	80
		The Sheepdog	81
		The Shepherd's Year	84
		Autumn Sorting of Ewes	84
		Flushing	85
		Tupping	85
		Summer and Autumn Dipping	86
		Feeding	87
		Winter Warmth	87
		Lambing	88
		Tailing, Castrating and Weaning	91
		Washing	91
PART I			
MUTTON THEN AND NOW			
What is Mutton?	1		
Types of Sheep Meat	2		
Types of Mutton	3		
Why Does Mutton Taste Different?	5		
Mutton as a Super-meat?	12		
Whatever Happened to Mutton?	15		
Wether Mutton Disappears	16		
Lambs Reared in a Year	17		
Wartime Effect	18		
Modern Lifestyles	19		
Mutton in British Culture	20		
Origin of the Name Mutton	20		
Sheep and Plants	20		
Sheep and Mutton in Names & Places	22		
Mutton in Literature	23		
Mutton in the Bible and Islam	24		
Mutton in Nursery Rhymes	25		
Mutton as Slang	26		
PART 2			
MANAGING MUTTON			
What Have Sheep Ever Done For Us?	29		
Nothing left but the Baa	30		
Mutton Fat	32		
Tallow in Soap Manufacture	33		
Mutton Candles	34		
Sheep Origins	36		
The Bronze Age	36		
Roman Occupation	37		



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A last birthday dinner of mutton for Captain Robert Scott (seated at head of table) before setting off to the South Pole, 6 June 1911

EWES MUTTON

Almost all of today's production of mutton meat in the UK is from ewes – older breeding female animals which are no longer suitable for that purpose, normally after they have had three or four crops of lambs. In mutton's Victorian heyday, ewe mutton was considered by many experts as the best, as the older animals had fully developed the real complexity and depth of the classic mutton flavour.

A writer in the 1930s remarked that *'The meat from ewes varies largely according to the age at which they are killed. The meat of young ewes that have had, say, one crop of lambs, while somewhat darker in the flesh than that of yearling sheep, is of good eating quality when well finished. The flesh of older ewes tends to become rather dark, and joints require more hanging. However, flavour is deeper.'*

It is the exceptional flavour of mature mutton which is its main attraction.

It is difficult to imagine today just how ubiquitous mutton was for hundreds of years, in the UK and abroad well into the 20th century. Not only were grilled mutton chops with mashed, fried and baked potatoes served to the First Class passengers at the last lunch served on board the Titanic, but several carcasses of mutton were taken by Captain Scott's

tragic last expedition to the South Pole. As Scott recorded in his diary for Tuesday 6th June 1911 *'It is my birthday, a fact I might easily have forgotten, but my kind people did not. After my walk I discovered that great preparations were in progress for a special dinner, and when the hour for that meal arrived we sat down to a sumptuous spread with our sledge banners hung about us. Clissold's especially excellent seal soup, roast mutton and red currant jelly, fruit salad, asparagus and chocolate – such was our menu. For drink we had cider cup, a mystery not yet fathomed, some sherry and a liqueur.'*

Earlier, in 1840, farmer Mr Clark Hillyard wrote *'Mutton is more easy to sell at a fair, remunerating price, than beef; it is the meat which people can feed on daily for the longest time without being tired; it is the meat best suited to all the middle classes of the community, and to most of the lower – and therefore being the food of the chief part of the population of the country, must ever be in good demand ...'*

As we shall see, apart from age, the other characteristic of mutton which the Victorians hotly debated was breed.

Why Does Mutton Taste Different?

The reason why good quality mutton was so popular was its flavour. But what produces flavour in meat?

There are, according to research by the UK's Meat Research Institute (now part of Bristol University), two main factors which give meat its taste.

Firstly, **the age of the animal**. The older the animal, the greater the flavour. So, as farming has intensified, it has been producing animals for meat at younger and younger ages. As a result, the flavour of meat has diminished over the last 50 years. This applies to all species, including red meat and particularly pork and chicken. The flavour of lamb is less intense and complex than that of the mutton, in the same way as veal is less flavour-some than beef. Beef cattle are a couple of years old at least, compared with a veal calf of a few months, and the difference in the flavour and even the texture of the two meats is very apparent. Chicken is often said to be pretty tasteless, and this is hardly surprising. Most



Author Bob Kennard (centre) with his butchers and mutton carcasses

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'Mutton is undoubtedly the meat most generally used in families. And, both by connoisseurs and medical men, it stands out first in favour, whether its fine flavour, digestible qualifications, or general wholesomeness be considered.'

Mrs Isabella Beeton (1861)



THE MODERN BRITISH STYLE

This selection of recipes reflects the modern take on cooking delicious mutton meals.

Mutton with Sumac and Butterbeans

Mutton and dry beans are a classic combination. This recipe was sent to us by the late Clarissa Dickson Wright, celebrity chef and staunch advocate of mutton.



Serves 4-6

Ingredients

1.4-1.8kg loin mutton, boned and rolled
 3 tbsp rapeseed oil
 500g shallots, chopped
 1 tablespoon sumac or the peel of 1 lemon
 2 wine glasses white wine
 3 tbsp brandy
 pinch cayenne pepper
 pinch paprika
 1½ tbsp runny honey
 2 cloves of garlic, peeled and roughly chopped
 salt
 180g butter beans or haricot beans, soaked overnight
 white wine vinegar (optional – to taste)

Method

Heat the oil in a heavy casserole and brown the shallots. Remove the shallots with a slotted spoon and set aside. Rub the mutton with sumac or, alternatively, pierce the meat and put slivers of lemon peel in each of the slots. Put the mutton into the casserole and brown all over.

Add the wine, brandy, cayenne pepper, paprika, honey, garlic and 1-2 teaspoons of salt. Stir and simmer uncovered for 1½ hours.

Alternatively, place in the oven at gas mark 3/325F/170°C. Add the beans, cover the casserole and cook for a further 1 hour, or until the meat is tender. If necessary, you can add a little water at this point and then taste. If light, add another tablespoon of runny honey and a little white wine vinegar.