

## The Flavour of Quality Mutton?

As well as the cultural and culinary heritage of mutton, it is its flavour which is a key to the very best mutton dish. Some say it tastes like a mixture of beef, venison and lamb, with a touch of sweetness. One thing it is not is simply strong lamb.

## Seasonality

The traditional season is autumn & winter, but many suppliers offer it year-round.

## Cooking

Whilst previously a factor in the decline of mutton, cooking the meat today couldn't be simpler, and the general rule is 'slow to be sure', although a few cuts, such as cannon, can be cooked quickly by experienced chefs.

Mutton is very versatile, from traditional roasts to casseroles and tagines, to broth, burgers and sausages, as well as other almost lost British traditions, such as mutton ham, and even macon (mutton bacon).

## Telling the Story

As with most quality products, it often helps to tell the story behind the meat. Try the ABCD of quality mutton. Tell customers the Age, Breed, Chilling/Hanging period and Diet which the animals were fed, as well as who produced the animals and where they were reared. Point of sale marketing material is available from the NSA's Make More of Mutton (MMOM) initiative (see below).

## Make More of Mutton

The National Sheep Association's Make More of Mutton initiative supports quality mutton supply chains, from farmer to processor, butcher, retailer and caterer. The work aims to popularise quality mutton, and to continue the return of the meat to its Victorian pride of place in British cooking.

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## Caterers' Guide to Quality Mutton

### What is Quality Mutton?

Mutton is defined as sheep meat over two years old. In the Victorian period, an ideal animal was around 4 to 6 years old. Until wool became uneconomic in the mid-20th century, mutton was from both wethers (castrated males used for wool production, producing 'wether mutton') and ewes which are no longer able to produce lambs ('ewe mutton'). Today mutton is almost invariably ewe mutton, and much of it is sought by the ethnic Indian and other communities.

### Why is mutton not more popular?

The eating experience of quality mutton has been praised by British writers over the centuries. Indeed, during the Victorian period, mutton was more popular than beef, so what happened to it? Its decline is due to changed agricultural practices, wartime folk memories and modern lifestyles. From the late C19th, lamb supplies increased with intensification of farming, and production in the New World, such as New Zealand.

Quality mutton needs good quality animals, produced and finished for the purpose, careful slaughter, hanging, butchering and cooking, requiring time often not available to busy people today. However, this approach is changing, and quality mutton is back on the menu. Having tried it, most people are hooked!



# What to look for when sourcing quality mutton

## Defining a Quality Carcass

### Age

Quality mutton animals should be at least two years old. Breeding rams should be avoided, especially Sept-Dec.

### Breeds

The Victorians were passionate about breeds of mutton and their impact on flavour and texture of meat. They considered three groups of breeds to be superior:

**Upland** – smaller, hardy breeds which thrived in harsh upland conditions such as Welsh Mountain, Scotch Blackface and Herdwick.

**Downland** – those breeds found on the chalk downs of southern England and elsewhere – the Southdown was a favourite, as were others such as the Oxford Down and Shropshire.

**Primitive** - breeds found predominantly on the western islands of the UK, such as the Hebridean, Soay (from St Kilda) and Manx.

This list of breeds is not exclusive, and good mutton is to be had from other breeds.

### Diet

The Victorians were great supporters of grass-fed animals, due to the perceived benefits to flavour, especially those grazing the herbs and wild plants on the tops of hills and mountains, or the salt marshes of coastal areas. The health benefits of grass-fed animals are now being discovered. The Omega 3 to Omega 6 ratio of meat (ideally 1:1), is more beneficial to human health in grass-fed ruminant meat than grain-fed. Mutton has the best ratio of all meats (red and white) at 2:1.

### Body Condition

For a quality mutton carcass, there must be a sufficient but not excessive covering of fat - levels of 2 to 3H are generally considered ideal. With upland and primitive breeds, fat tends to be external, but some other breeds can produce excessive fat between the muscle blocks, which should be avoided. Carcass weights are higher than for lambs. Conformation grades often do not exceed R, but good quality mutton may be had from an upland breed with P classification. However, value of meat yield against carcass cost should be considered.



## Slaughter and Butchery

### Slaughter

Minimising stress is vitally important for the resulting quality of the meat. Reducing numbers of journeys and their duration, as well as good handling in the abattoir helps reduce stress levels.

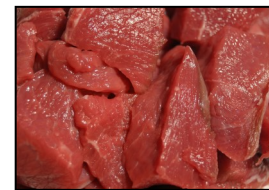
### Chilling/hanging

Natural maturing of meat through hanging brings better flavour and a more tender texture. The period of hanging for mutton will depend on carcass fat levels, but periods of at least 10 days are recommended.

### Butchering

Butchering and cuts of mutton are very similar to those of lamb. Current regulations require the splitting of carcasses, so saddle of mutton, once a popular joint, is no longer possible. Regional variations in the popularity of particular cuts can be found. Cuts are generally larger than for lamb.

**Shoulders**, either as half or whole, boned and rolled or on the bone.



**Diced** mutton is in good demand for its versatility, and shoulders are the best source.

**Loins** are popular joints, on or off the bone. Loin fillets are popular with some cooks for faster cooking. and racks remain popular.



**Mutton chops**, best end, loin and chump

**Legs** (on or off bone) are still a favourite roasting joint.



**Neck** is popular for stews, such as Lancashire Hotpot.

**Mince** can be used in a variety of easily prepared meals, sausages or burgers.

**Offal** can be stronger flavoured than lamb, although heart, kidney and liver can offer a cheap and tasty meal.

