

Salt-loving Lambs

Contributed by Noel Thevenet
Monday, 02 April 2007
Last Updated Saturday, 07 April 2007

The windswept marsh lands of the northern French coastline are home to some of the France's most sought after culinary products, both from the sea and the land. Scallops, oyster, mussels and lobster for partaking of the sea and potatoes, apples, butter and the exquisite pré salé lamb, "pre-salted" from grazing on salty sea-brush around Mont Saint-Michel during low tide. But don't go looking outside of Brittany or Normandy for this delicate, tasty lamb raised on salt sprayed grasses, since the majority of the production is only shared with locals.

Pré salé or salt marsh lamb is hot right now. Thanks to its status as a terroir product, it has become as sought after as oysters from Cancale. For many, a visit to Mont Saint-Michel is not complete without a taste of this mythic meat. But outside of the windswept Normandy and Brittany regions, where sheep graze freely on marsh grass that is regularly sprayed with salt and iodine and sometimes completely covered by tidal waters, it is next to impossible to come by.

Although there are 4 areas on the northern coast of France where pré salé lamb is produced, Mont Saint-Michel, one of the top visited monuments in France, with its "Grévin" labelled lamb, is the most well known. With a total of only 45 producers, the Mont produces a mere 2,500 carcasses per year, the large majority of which are sold directly to local restaurants and butchers. In fact the total French production of pré salé lamb, including the Baie of Somme, Ille et Villain and Havres du Cotentin, hovers around just 10,000 lambs. As one of the top 10 lamb eating nations at 10 pounds per person (compared to 1 pound per person in the US), France already imports almost 50% of its lamb and with the number of breeders holding steady there is probably no chance that current French production will meet demand in the near future. So, don't expect to find much pré salé anytime soon outside of France. There are however a few other countries that produce salt marsh lamb including Wales, Germany and Canada.

France is well aware of the terroir status of this meat and recently, pré salé lamb from the Baie de Somme was the first lamb variety to receive the coveted French AOC label officially setting conditions and rules that producers are required to follow to sell under the AOC label. As opposed to milk fed lamb that is slaughtered at 30-40 days when it is still fully fed on its mother's milk, salt marsh lamb, after 4-5 weeks sous la mère, grazes on saltwater marshes and meadows for the next 4-6 months. This type of diet gives the meat a distinctive iodine flavor. The sea sprayed grasses also impart a much more tender flesh resembling that of a younger animal. So, whereas some people feel that milk fed lamb lacks flavor but is vastly more tender compared to older animals, pré salé carries a true lamb flavour and is also extremely tender.

Procuring pré salé lamb can be equated to the luck of the draw if you do not live in one of the producer areas. If you live in Paris, you may luck out in living not too far from one of the few butchers who carry the lamb. Sovia, a

meat provider at Rungis, the largest wholesale food market in the world located just south of Paris, sells only about ten carcasses per year. And when I called to inquire they wouldn't even admit to selling the lamb at all. In other words, they can barely provide for their current clients and aren't looking for new ones.

The tasting

Thanks

to a few American blogs and websites I was able to come up with 4 addresses of butchers who carry this rarefied meat in Paris. I'm sure that there are more but I was unable to find a complete listing.

Thierry Michaud, named meilleur ouvrier de France, of the exquisite Boucherie Nouvelle in the 15th arrondissement, sells his rack of pré salé lamb for 34€/kilo(\$11/lb) whereas regular rack goes for 27€/kilo(\$9/lb). It is a price difference but not wholly unexpected or inexplicable considering the current demand for pré salé.

The lamb I had pre-ordered was lovingly prepared with a design carved into the fat that looked stunning when roasted. There was a noticeable hush in the shop when the butcher announced that I was buying pré salé; or perhaps his customers were merely drooling.

In looking around for original pairings for pré salé lamb, I started with Olivier Roellinger, at his 3 stars Maisons de Bricourt in Cancale, who has been known to mix cardamom, sesame and nigella seeds into bread crumbs to create a lightly seasoned crust on a rack for 2. On his web site, he also proposes a recipe in which a rack of pré salé is simply roasted with nothing more than salt and pepper, a clove of garlic and served with a ragout of local spring vegetables. I decided to go with a simple roast recipe accompanied by a sorrel sauce that I had previously tasted on a leg of lamb. The tart citrus flavour of the sorrel seemed strong enough to enhance the lamb yet was light enough to allow the iodine flavour to come through.

The

result was a truly spectacular dish. The lamb was perfect – the true taste of lamb without the pungent aftertaste. And the meat cut like butter, but still had sufficient texture, making it pleasing to the palette. One caveat, the meat loses most of its appeal if even slightly overcooked – keep the flesh pink. A hot oven, good meat thermometer and adequate rest time should eliminate any risk.