

Newsletter – March 2009

Sixty Lambs-a-Leaping...

We have lots of lambs at Dunhill Ranch this spring. There are over sixty lambs on the ground and we expect to have the first ones available for purchase in August. We sold out very quickly in 2008, so we are taking reservations for lambs this year. It doesn't cost anything to ensure that we save one for you; just let us know that you would like one by calling 575-854-2847 or e-mail us at DunhillRanch@Hughes.net.



Molly watching over sheep in the corrals

Graduation Day

Unlike many students, who graduate school in May, regardless of whether they have learned how to read or write, there's no set graduation day for Great Pyrenees Guardian Dogs. They graduate from sheep-school when they have demonstrated both the ability to drive off predators and the ability to stay calmly with the flock, no matter how boring it gets.

We are happy to announce the graduation of Molly, our youngest Pyr, who turned two years old on February 28th. She assumes primary guardian duties along with Rocky, her father,

while her mother Sally eases into retirement.

Being a guardian dog is like flying an airplane—there are long hours of boredom followed by a few minutes of intense activity. The hardest thing for the dogs to learn is when to be aggressive and when to be passive.

Pyr's are naturally protective and, at night, when the corrals are surrounded with coyotes and mountain lions, Molly spends very little time sleeping—constant vigilance is required. During the day, Molly just has to relax and adjust to the fact that there is nothing to do, since during lambing season, the whole flock stays in the corrals until the lambs are big enough to keep up with the flock out on pasture. This is the hardest thing for a Pyr to learn and is the final exam before graduation.

In another few weeks, Pyr's and sheep will be back on pasture and we are confident that Molly is ready for her new responsibilities.

Why is my Lamb Labeled "Not for Sale"?

There are two different types of meat-processing facilities in New Mexico. One type is typically a large volume or industrial plant that primarily produces packages of meat for sale in supermarkets. They have a full-time USDA inspector on-site who may have to inspect hundreds of animals a day.

The other type is a custom processor. These facilities deal with individual customers and are visited periodically by the USDA inspector.

The USDA limits custom facilities to processing an animal for its owner. In order to prevent supermarket re-sale, the packages are required to be labeled "Not for Sale".

We use a custom processor because we believe that the individual attention that each order gets is the best guarantee of quality.

Lamb Stock or Demi-Glace

Makes 20 cups stock or 8 cups demi-glace

So, what do you do with all those bones that are left over from the processing of your lamb or from that last dinner party? Don't throw them out! With a little bit of effort you can make the most delicious soup and gravy base that you have ever tasted.

We have adapted the following recipe from Jacque Pepin's "The Art of Cooking". The recipe initially called for veal bones (good luck finding those, these days) but we found that it works well with leftover bones from a tray of chops or whatever lamb bones are handy.

Ingredients

10 pounds lamb bones (raw or cooked)
1 pound yellow onions, unpeeled & quartered
¾ pound carrots, cut into 1" chunks
1 head of garlic, cloves separated & crushed
1 bunch parsley or the stems from 2 bunches
¾ pound chopped celery (leaves & centers ok)
6 bay leaves
1 Tbs dried thyme
1 Tbs whole black peppercorns
1-1/2 pounds ripe tomatoes (canned is ok)

Technique

Put the bones in a single layer on two roasting pans (we use commercial half-sheet pans with a 1" lip). Roast them in a 400 degree oven for 1-1/2 hours, turning them every 20 minutes or so.

Add the onions and carrots to the pans and continue roasting for another 45 minutes, turning every 15 minutes. The bones should be nicely browned, but not burnt. You may have to remove some of the bones early, if they look like they are getting too brown.

Put the bones and vegetables in a large stockpot (20-30 quarts, if you have one) or split them evenly into two smaller pots.

Discard any fat that is on the roasting pans, and then add about a cup of water to the pans and heat them on top of the stove until the water simmers.

Using a spatula, scrape all the brown bits from the bottom of the pans and pour the liquid into the stockpot. Be careful not to burn the juices as they will then be bitter and unusable. Do not use burned or blackened bones or pan drippings—discard them!

Fill the stockpot with water up to about 2 inches below the rim and bring to a boil. Boil gently for about 45 minutes and then remove from the heat and skim off as much fat as you can. Using a ladle and a fat separator makes this a snap. Add all the remaining ingredients and bring to a boil again. Cover and boil gently for 8-10 hours or overnight.

Strain the stock into another pot through the finest mesh sieve you have. Do not attempt to squeeze the juices from the solids as this will muddy the stock. Set it aside to cool.

When the stock is completely cold, remove any fat that has come to the top. If needed, bring the stock to a boil again and reduce it to about 5 quarts. When cold, it should be light colored, practically fat-free, salt-free, and rather gelatinous. This is an excellent base for soups and stews, far superior to any beef stock that you can buy. You can keep it in the fridge for up to a week, or freeze it in plastic tubs. Or you can make demi-glace.

Demi-glace is just a reduced brown stock. To make it, take the original 5 quarts of stock and boil it down to about 2 quarts and then cool it. It should be highly gelatinous, and have a beautiful dark reddish-brown color.

When the demi-glace is still cool, pour it into a flat pan, so that the liquid is only about 1" deep. Then put it into the refrigerator. When it is completely cold, slice it with a sharp knife and remove the chunks from the pan. Wrap them in plastic wrap or put them into a sealed plastic bag and freeze them. They stay good indefinitely, and are really handy when you need a little sauce or stock.

One of our favorite uses for demi-glace is to pan-fry a pound of sliced mushrooms until they are nice and brown. Then we add ½ cup demi-glace, ½ cup water, and 1 Tbs of plum jam and cook it until we have a nice thick mushroom gravy. It's quick, easy, and delicious.

Lamb Cooking Tips

If you're like us, you grew up thinking that a lamb was some strange beast that consisted only of chops. The first time that we got a whole lamb back from the processor, there were a half-dozen packages that we had NO idea where they came from or what to do with them.

The chart at the right gives an excellent overview of where the most common lamb cuts come from, but it's a little sparse on the cooking details. Here are some tips that you may find useful.

ROASTING— The most important thing to remember when roasting lamb is not to overcook it. An overcooked roast will be too tough for mortals to digest and will be quite uninteresting except as a chewing exercise. An instant-read meat thermometer is your friend! Inserted into the thickest part of the meat, it should read 125 degrees for rare, 135 for medium rare, or 145-150 for medium. Note: ground lamb in any form should be thoroughly cooked to 160 degrees.

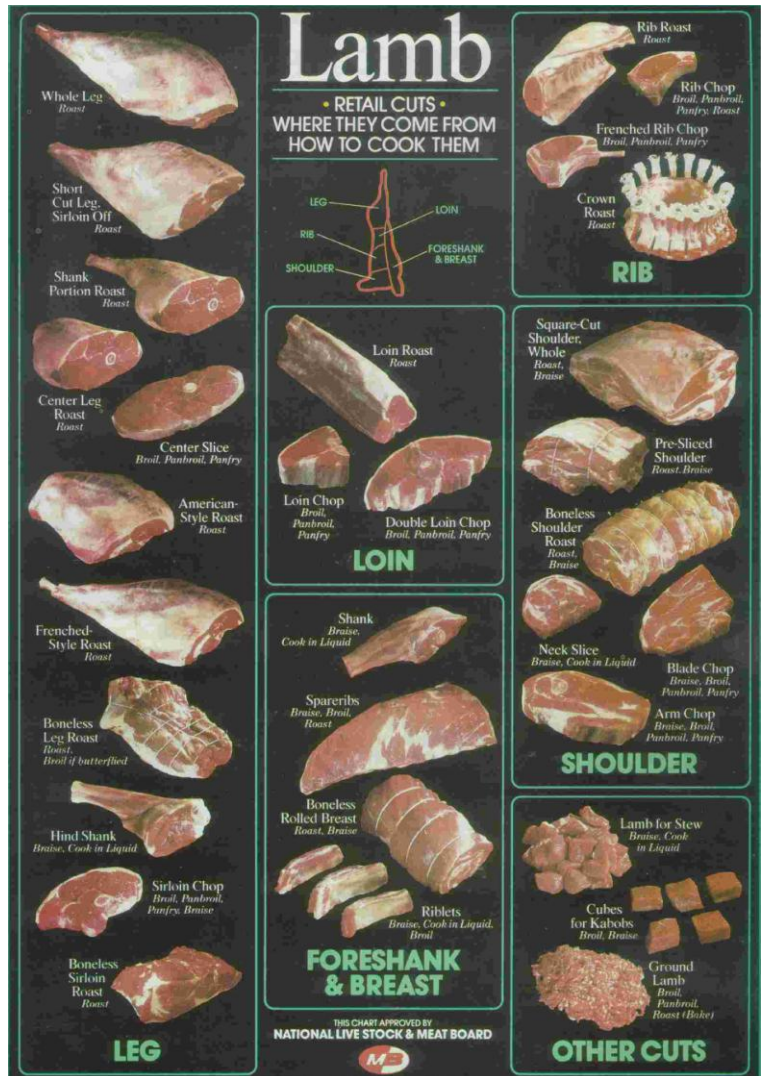
Another thing: a roast will continue to cook for some time after you remove it from the oven. Many recipes recommend "tenting" the roast with aluminum foil for 5-10 minutes after it leaves the oven. A tented roast will retain more of its juices when sliced, but you might want to remove the roast when it is a degree or two cooler than "done".

Rubbing spices on the outside of a roast before cooking is a great way to get flavorful meat. The spice rub can be as simple as salt and pepper, or a more adventurous combination. We are very fond of a mix that contains paprika, red chile, cumin, brown sugar, oregano, black pepper, and salt. Whatever mix you use, remember to pat the meat dry before applying the rub.

Slit-and-insert is another spicing technique. To do this you make small slits all over the meat and insert bits of garlic or rosemary or other spices. This results in a roast where every bite has a hint of your seasonings.

PAN-FRYING— This technique works best if your pan is HOT. We like to sear the meat quickly on both sides and then transfer it to another dish and let it finish cooking in the oven. This gives a nice brown crust to the meat while the interior is perfectly cooked, and it allows us to de-glaze the pan for a sauce while the meat finishes. Use an instant-read thermometer to gauge doneness. We use a Thermanpen model, but there are plenty of other reliable ones out there.

Remember to closely trim the fat from any cut that you are pan-frying— this will help keep the grease out of your sauce and off your stovetop. You can pre-season chops with a spice mix, but you have to be very careful to avoid burning the spices in the browning stage. We prefer to marinate our chops, or to use a simple salt and pepper mix which tends to be harder to burn.



Cooking Tips - Continued

Braising— When braising or stewing lamb, low and slow is the way to go. The cuts that are traditionally braised are tougher and require a steady low heat for several hours to become tender. A crock-pot is a really good way to achieve this.

Meat that is to be braised is often browned first. This can be done on the stove top or in a hot oven, but in either case, be sure to trim off any excess fat, otherwise your sauce will be greasy. When browning the meat, resist the temptation to try to cram all the pieces in one pan. You need to keep space between pieces or the meat will stew instead of turning brown.

Want to make stew but are short of stew meat? Try defrosting a blade chop or shoulder roast instead of using the meat from the leg which tends to be pretty lean and works best as kebabs on the grill. And save those bones for lamb stock!

Braised lamb tends to go well with a sauce containing onions and tomatoes. Served with some boiled and buttered new potatoes, this makes a dish to satisfy the hungriest shepherd.

Many people say of a braise or stew, "It always tastes better the second day!". The idea is that the flavors mingle in the fridge like guys and girls at a school dance. If you have the foresight and the moral fiber to resist eating it all today, by all means, put it in the refrigerator and heat it up tomorrow.

Spices— Everyone knows that lamb and mint go together like beer and brats, and many people will sell their grandmothers for the chance to eat a plate of grilled lamb chops with rosemary and garlic, but what about all the other jars at the back of your spice cabinet?

How about cloves (those tiny brown bits you filter out of the mulled cider)? Pretty amazingly, a few cloves and some bay leaves transform a plate of lamb and beans into a dish fit for a king. Use them whole and take them out before serving.

Fennel is another spice often overlooked.

Fennel seeds, toasted in a pan and then ground, make an interesting addition to a spice rub or can be added to a stir-fry with some orange peel for a Malaysian twist.

Lamb curry exists in a thousand varieties from all over the world, but lots of folks can't take the heat of prepared curry powders. If you mix some ground cumin with ground coriander and add just a dash of turmeric, you get a spice mix that gives you the pungent flavor of curry without the heat. Cumin also works well as a spice rub.

Presentation— Are you inviting friends over for a lamb dinner? Want to make it a bit special? Don't forget the impact colors can have. Dress up a plate of chops and potatoes with lightly sautéed snap peas and red onion, or garnish a lamb stew with freshly chopped tomatoes and parsley.

A nice hot plate helps make sure that your dinner tastes great. You can heat plates in a 200 degree oven in about 10 minutes or just pop them on top of the toaster oven when you start cooking. They'll be hot by the time you are ready to serve.

Prices 2009

Unfortunately, prices for just about everything we use on the ranch seem to go up every year. We have held our lamb prices steady for two years now, but we have to raise them this year to cover our operating costs.

- Live-weight Prices (Ranch Pickup)
 - Live Animal Sales (\$1.60/lb) or
 - Processed (\$2.85/lb)
- Delivery Charges
 - Socorro - \$30
 - Albuquerque - \$50
 - Santa Fe - \$70

Whenever possible, we deliver multiple orders in a single trip. In these cases, we discount the delivery charge.

And for the very adventurous – we offer facilities and assistance at the ranch for doing your own processing – \$20.