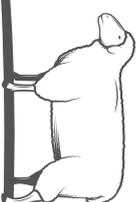


RECOGNISING QUALITY AND PROTECTING CULINARY HERITAGE

Whether it is Champagne in France or Parmigiano Reggiano in Italy, Europe has for years realised the potential and need to protect their locally produced food products that are inseparable from its terroir. There is only one place in the world where the forces come together so magically and produce a product with such specific characteristics and superior quality that it is worth protecting. This magic is not exclusive to Europe. We also have it. It has taken South Africa a long time to develop the same pride in our home-grown products and the highlight has undoubtedly been our first origin certified food product: Karoo Lamb.



For years we have called any lamb on our menus Karoo Lamb, as long as the butcher said so. There was little guarantee and even less traceability. This is no longer the case. Through a lengthy and complex process the Karoo Development Foundation have registered a set of rules with the Department of Trade and Industry that specifies what constitutes Karoo Lamb.

Today regulation 47 of R146 which was issued under the Foodstuffs, Cosmetics and Disinfectants Act No 54 of 1972 prohibits the use of the term Karoo Lamb, unless the product is indeed linked to the protocol registered with the Department of Agriculture, or regulations in terms of the Agricultural Producers Standards Acts No 119 of 1990 or the National Regulator for Compulsory Specifications Act No 5 of 2008.

But what exactly is Karoo Lamb? Professor Johann Kirsten, member of the Karoo Development Foundation and head of the Department Agricultural Economics at the University Pretoria, explains that the greatest challenge in the certification process was not to determine what Karoo Lamb is, but rather "where is the Karoo."

The fact that this vegetation does not keep to municipal or provincial boundaries caused some debate as farmers who

Studies have shown that the unique flavour attributes of Karoo Lamb is derived from the indigenous veld vegetation in the region, specifically the "Siveterkaro", "Skapbosse", "Kopkooosse", "Rivierganna", "Ankerkaro" and "Pentebos". In order for farmers to be classified as a Karoo Lamb farmer, they have to proof that the six abovementioned Karoo bushes are present on more than 60% of their grazing fields.

fall outside of the "traditional" Karoo boundaries can now, according to this definition based on vegetation, also be regarded as Karoo farmers.

A further specification is that the animals have to be reared through a free range grazing system and supplementary feed may not exceed 30% of the animal's daily intake. Sheep (regardless of breed) have to be born in the region or spend at least six months in the Karoo before slaughter. Good animal welfare ranging from medical treatment to sheering and transportation methods are also monitored through this process.

Karoo Lamb must travel no further than 250km to the abattoir who has to be registered with the Red Meat Abattoir Association of South Africa and have a HAS (Hygiene Assessment System) rating of at least 75%. Carcasses are tagged with a serial number and barcode after grading, classification and weighing. The carcass tag also includes the abattoir name.

contact details and it is affixed to the Achilles tendon. Certified Karoo Meat of Origin abattoirs will also ink the distinctive windmill stamp on the leg of the carcass.

As the meat moves to packing and processing plants, retailers or butchers follow the traceability system, and when meat is packed a Karoo Meat of Origin Label is affixed including the packer's certification number as well as a label with a barcode and information regarding the cut, weight and price of the packaged meat.

According to Professor Kirsten the certification mark guarantees:

1. That the sheep meat originates from the Karoo region
2. The sheep was reared as free range
3. There are no added routine antibiotics or hormones

This guarantee is not only a victory for consumers who can now confidently pay a bit more for the quality they are promised.

but for the first time the economic benefits derived from this quality product will go to the Karoo - where it belongs. The name "Karoo Lamb" has been misappropriated for long enough. Kirsten also received news at the end of last year that the European Union will accept our certification of Karoo Lamb and also protect it according to its PGI and PGI certification system in Europe.

It is not only about technical correctness and giving the farmers the credit that is due, but also about taking ownership and protecting our culinary heritage. Biltong, rooibos, bunny chow, boerewors, umngusho - it is all part of our DNA as South Africans and all worth protecting. And with recent statistics showing that biltong is contributing R2 billion to the economy a year, it could also be good for business to protect our culinary heritage.

Where can I find Karoo Lamb for my menu? Visit www.karooonnet.org.za for certified Karoo Lamb suppliers nationwide.



Adde Stehler-van der Westhuizen is the Executive Chef of Pine Leth Chef's Academy and is fascinated by the intricacies and history that is brought to the table by each ingredient.