

## “Keep it legal: Marketing Karoo Lamb in South Africa”

*One of the major trends in food consumption in our increasingly urbanised world is the need to know and trust the origin of our food. The concerns about the welfare and safety of produce are increasingly dominating the choices and purchase decisions, as is evident from the recent horse meat scandal in Europe. In addition to being able to trace a product back to its source, communicating directly with the farmer and interacting with the custodian of our food is becoming more important and doable on the Internet.*

**By Johann Kirsten, Head of the Department of Agricultural Economics, Extension and Rural Development at the University of Pretoria**

This desire to be linked to the origin of food has been part of the meat trade in South Africa for decades through well-known products such as Karoo lamb – one of South Africa’s iconic food products. Within South African folklore Karoo lamb is well known for its intricate flavour while many “foodies” strongly believe that lamb and

mutton from the Karoo region of South Africa have distinctive and desirable herby flavours and aromas.

Recently a study of the sensory profiles of mutton from different regions of South Africa conducted by the Agricultural Research Council (ARC) found that there are indeed strong differences in the flavour attributes of mutton from the Karoo region.

This combination of distinctive taste and affection for the Karoo region has the potential to translate into economic value and as such the Karoo name has large commercial value. Sadly, the widespread misappropriation and abuse of the term “Karoo” has done considerable damage to the brand value of Karoo lamb.

Despite this uniqueness of the product, its “local is lekker” identity as well as its free range character, the product is sold at the same price as feedlot farmed, foreign sourced meat. One can therefore rightfully ask: Is it ethically and morally correct to treat such an iconic product like a commodity and pay the Karoo farmers the same price than sheep from feedlots or regions closer to the market?

With the passing of the Consumer Protection Act consumers in South Africa



nowadays have more power to protect their rights, including the right to be informed and the right not to be misled. It therefore becomes critical for butchers to understand when and where they are allowed to call the lamb they sell “Karoo lamb”.

There were many cases in the past where consumers were buying meat sold as Karoo lamb but which in reality originated from regions outside the Karoo. The Consumer Protection Act now entitles consumers to accurate and truthful information about the products they purchase. With fines of up to 10% of annual turnover, the mislabelling of products now come with significant liability risk as consumers have the right to approach the Consumer Commission in instances where the origin or qualities are misrepresented.

Significant reforms have also recently been made to food labelling regulations in South Africa. The Department of Agricultural Economics, Extension and Rural Development would like to draw the attention of readers in particular to R146 which was issued under the Foodstuffs, Cosmetics and Disinfectants Act No 54 of 1972.

Regulation 47 of R146 prohibits the use of the term “Karoo lamb”, except in those instances where the use thereof is linked to a protocol registered with the Department of Agriculture, or regulations in terms of the Agricultural Products Standards Act No 119 of 1990, or the National Regulator for Compulsory Specifications Act No 5 of 2008. This regulation holds important implications for anyone engaged in the marketing of Karoo meat as it effectively bars the description of meat as originating from the Karoo unless it is done within the narrowly defined scope of regulation 47.

Regulations issued under the Agricultural Products Standards Act 119 of 1990 and which govern the marking of meat furthermore prohibits the use of terms which may create the impression that meat is of special or particular quality. These regulations mean that unless

exemption has been granted under section 3(1) (c) of the Agricultural Products Standards Act No 119 of 1990, the use of the words “Karoo lamb” either on the container of meat or stamped on a carcass would be prohibited.

The legislative and regulatory framework in South Africa thus prohibits not only the misleading or false use of the term “Karoo lamb”, but indeed prohibits all use of the term if not used as part of an approved protocol.

In order to help butchers and abattoirs overcome these legal impediments and to protect the national heritage and marketing value embedded in the term, The Karoo Development Foundation has on behalf of the sheep farmers in the Karoo gone through the organisational and legal pains to register a certification scheme. The Karoo Meat of Origin certification scheme, which has been registered with the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries and which authorises participants to use the Karoo Meat of Origin certification mark, provides marketers of Karoo Meat with a means of ensuring legislative compliance and protects consumers from misleading marketing practices.

The Karoo Meat of Origin scheme operates





## Meat of the Month

on the basis of an application process in terms of which supply chain participants are inspected against the standards of the scheme. These standards are available at [www.karooomeatoforigin.com](http://www.karooomeatoforigin.com). Once found to be in compliance, the successful applicant qualifies to use the Karoo Meat of Origin certification mark. Regular audits by SAMIC ensure the integrity of the scheme.

The protocol for Certified Karoo Meat of Origin is applied to most mutton and lamb, regardless of breed, produced and slaughtered in the Karoo region. Only sheep originating from the Karoo, i.e. born and raised in the Karoo or having spent a minimum of six months in the Karoo before slaughter, are considered. All meat must comply with legal requirements as far as quality and safety is concerned. Third party auditors check all processes.

Key aspects of the Karoo Meat of Origin scheme is compliance with all meat hygiene legislation in South Africa and an impeccable traceability system which allows the consumer to trace back the packet of meat purchased at

certified outlets back to the farm of origin.

In most abattoirs complying with the Hygiene Assessment System (HAS) criteria batch traceability systems are in operation whereby carcasses are tagged with a serial number and barcode after grading, classification and weighing.

The carcass tag with the serial number or batch number, abattoir name, abattoir telephone numbers and barcode is affixed to the Achilles tendon. In the case of the Certified Karoo Meat of Origin abattoirs, a stamp (the certification mark) is also applied to the same leg where the carcass tag is affixed.

On arrival at the certified processing and packaging plant, retailer butcher or butchery, the carcasses should again be kept in batches to ensure a traceable system and to ensure that carcasses from the Karoo region are kept together during processing.

When the meat is packed, the processing and packaging plant, retailer butcher or butchery affixes a label with the Certified Karoo Meat of Origin logo, the packer's certification number, the farmer's certification number as well as a label with a barcode and information regarding the meat cut, and the price and weight of the packaged meat.

This certification mark (logo) guarantees the following:

- The sheep meat originates from the Karoo region;
- The sheep was reared as free range;
- There are no added routine antibiotics or hormones.

*Interested retailers can order pre-packed certified Karoo Lamb cuts from Cavalier Foods (Gauteng) by contacting Reinhard Mulder on (011) 826 6452, or by contacting Meat of Origin Karoo via Magda Combrink at [magda@maxitechno.com](mailto:magda@maxitechno.com).*

