The story of Karoo lamb

SOUTH AFRICA HAS A PROUD TAPESTRY OF PEOPLE, CULTURES, BELIEFS AND CUSTOMS. BUT IT’S NOT ONLY OUR PEOPLE WHO ARE DIVERSE. SA HAS SOME UNIQUE FAUNA AND FLORA TOO — AND THEN THERE’S ONE OF OUR NATIONAL TREASURES: KAROO LAMB.

WORDS: ANÉL POTGIETER

for hundreds of years, sheep in the Karoo have foraged on its sparse and arid plains, the shrubs giving the lamb its characteristic texture and herby flavour. This, combined with the area’s climate and the producers’ farming methods, means Karoo lamb is world-renowned, with a global consumer demand for the product.

There’s a catch, though: many food labels indiscriminately use the name Karoo lamb. Ask your local restaurant, supermarket or butcher for the origin of the meat; often, they can’t guarantee it’s from the area.

It’s for this reason that the Karoo Development Foundation (KDF) requires lamb to be certified; producers need to label their meat with Karoo Meat of Origin to guarantee its authenticity. Professor Johann Kirsten, head of the department of agricultural economics and a professor at the University of Pretoria, gives us more info...

WHERE ARE THE KAROO’S BOUNDARIES?

“Karoo lamb originates from a strictly specified production region. The boundaries have been determined based on the natural occurrence of the shrubs and vegetation that gives Karoo lamb its distinctive flavour. It therefore consists of municipalities in the Western Cape, Northern Cape, Eastern Cape and Free State, where typical Karoo vegetation is present.”
EXPERT OPINION

Abigail Donnelly (food editor of Taste magazine) “Karoo lamb is an indigenous South African ingredient that we can proudly showcase to the rest of the world. What I really love about it is that it has unique and unmistakable flavours. This is not simply another melktert or chakalaka dish but an exceptional South African ingredient.”

Errieda du Toit (cookbook author) “I reckon certified Karoo lamb will be the flavour of the decade and that simple lamb dishes with minimum seasoning will be rediscovered to display the unique flavour of the meat at its best.”

Hetta van Deventer-Terblanche (food historian) “We need to protect our country’s diversity. Through this terroir-specific brand, we add not only value to our great products, but we also cater for the growing sophisticated consumer market. It becomes more and more important for consumers to know where and how products originate.”

“Each certified lamb is sold with a stamp and packaged labelling that vouches for its authenticity.” – Professor Johann Kirsten

WHAT IS THE KDF ABOUT?
“The KDF is the driving force behind the Karoo Meat of Origin certification. The KDF ensures communities in the Karoo benefit from commercialisation of the region’s lamb, natural assets, arts, crafts and tourism. Drawing together many different individuals, we work towards promoting the regional cohesion of the Karoo and sustainable socioeconomic development.”

WHAT IS THE KAROO MEAT OF ORIGIN LABEL?
“Each certified lamb is sold with a stamp and packaged labelling that vouches for its authenticity. The certification label consists of a barcode and logo, and ensures that the lamb is:
• From the Karoo region
• Free-range
• Traceable
• Free from added hormones and routine antibiotics”

HOW CAN I TRACE MY MEAT?
“Every cut of meat is marked with a certification number and tracking code. Consumers buying the meat can scan the QR code with their cellphones or enter the barcode number of the label package on the Karoo Meat of Origin website (www.karoomeatoforigin.com). You will then learn more about the farmer, the precise area where the animal was reared and particulars as to the processing and final packaging of the produce.”

HOW TO BRAAI KAROO LAMB CHOPS
Each year, two wine producers – Du Toitskloof and Muratie – come together to contest their culinary skills. This year was no different as the two teams faced each other across the coals. The rivals had to prepare two dishes on a braai using certified Karoo meat – one in a pot and the other straight over the fire. Emerging victorious was Kim Melck (see right) from Muratie with her winning recipe…

Ingredients
• Loin lamb chops, deboned
• Skewer sticks, soaked in water an hour before you braai
• String
• Coarse salt and black pepper

Method
1. With the meat intact, roll up the loin lamb chops to form a pinwheel.
2. Spear with a wooden skewer. Using a length of string, bind each pinwheel so it holds together.
3. Sprinkle with coarse salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste. Braai over hot coals.
4. Serve directly from the grill – the meat should be slightly pink inside.