
The Karoo Lamb enigma

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In the mind of producers, consumers and the man on the street Karoo Lamb seems to be a mercurial concept and somewhat “borderless” much like the area it hails from. Mr Jackman’s article in the *Daily Maverick*: “Meating requirements: When is Karoo Lamb Karoo Lamb?” highlights many of the talking points in relation to what Karoo Lamb is and what space it should occupy in the marketing of lamb in South Africa.

The brand equity that was developed over many years and which is currently lodged in the marque “Karoo Lamb” is undeniable. It is widely known, accepted and used throughout the value chain from farmers marketing their own stock to butcheries and restaurants offering it to consumers. It is also this very brand equity that is built around “wholesomeness, a sense of place and the distinctive taste of animals reared on the herbaceous shrubs of the Karoo” that is brazenly misappropriated. The recent development of the Karoo Meat of Origin Certification Scheme as a means to valorise Karoo Lamb has just brought the intrinsic marketing value of Karoo Lamb on the one hand and the misleading use of the designation on the other hand into greater focus.

However, the intrinsic value of Karoo Lamb as a marque and its potential to differentiate lamb from a specific area produced in a specific way seems unsettled. Should it be an indeterminate description of lamb or mutton that is steeped in folklore and that can be used by anyone without verification or should it be a managed tool to differentiate and conclusively assure consumers of an authentic product with a story - the real thing?

It is well-known that the production and marketing system for lamb and mutton is not one dimensional. Plenty of mutton also finds its way through the system to consumers. However, at the heart of it all the arrangement is historically and fundamentally a commodity oriented system driven largely by prices rather than by value. Opportunities to leverage differentiating attributes of veld reared lamb from a bone-fide Karoo farm in a cohesive offer to consumers, for example, are lost in the prevailing commodity system for lamb.

The fact that significant quantities of lamb and mutton are born, raised, finished on the veld and slaughtered in the Karoo is an opportunity in the marketing of a differentiated product that is squandered. While some retailers make use of their own branding and

certification systems and place of origin labelling these arrangements are hardly focussed on capitalizing on the full potential of authentic and certifiable veld reared lamb from the Karoo. This is the gap that the Certified Karoo Meat of Origin sought to fill in differentiation and promoting bone-fide Karoo Lamb. In a world that is awash with commodities there are clear opportunities to capitalise on the nice appeal of products and the production processes, especially if the product is produced in a wholesome yet evocative landscape where there is a clear link between the product attributes and where and how it is produced.

Bone-fide veld reared Karoo Lamb requires a very specific set of circumstances to produce it is self-evident that limited and varying quantities of lamb could would meet the criteria for lamb with the Certified Karoo Meat of Origin. In this regard it is interesting that consumers are quite accepting of seasonal products like strawberries, citrus, Maatjes (young herring in Belgium and the Netherlands), to name a few but that a niche for Certified Karoo Lamb based on its actual availability is not well developed. An approach that is sensitive to the availability of bone-fide Karoo Lamb is yet another angle to contemplate in the positioning of such lamb in the mind of the consumer - but which is currently forfeited in the commodity approach to the marketing of lamb.

The fundamental and primary philosophy of the Certified Karoo platform is to enable differentiation and to allow for transparent communication of the attributes and place of origin of the lamb to the consumer. A feedlot lamb or a veld-reared hogget should not be sold to consumers as Karoo Lamb. Veld reared and finished lamb from a bone-fide Karoo farm should be designated as Karoo Lamb and certified as such. The central principle of differentiation is that the differentiated product must be of value to the consumer and exclusion measures must be used to guard the differentiation. In this regard the Karoo Meat of Origin scheme was established for and by producers and people of the Karoo as a tool to differentiate, protect and promote a specific very specific product. And at the end of the day it is for the players in the chain to shape the scheme so that it is fit for purpose.

Ultimately, meeting consumers' needs sustainably in a landscape where consumers increasingly require full visibility of the product and processes in value chains requires a mind-shift of the whole chain away from the commodification and towards differentiation of a product. Willingness to pay a premium for authentic products and products with certified and verified places of origin is a testimony to the demand drive for "the real thing". The future for products in a complex consumer environment lies not in mis-labelling or anonymity of products and processes but rather in full chain visibility.

In the end, to use an analogy, that is right in the kraal of a farmer. It is little use to buy a new bakkie and keep in the shed and then proclaim that the bakkie is of no use and deserves standing in the shed. Or that the use of the bakkie is "complicated". The alternative view is, however, that the only way to reap the value of the bakkie is to use it fully for its intended purpose. The more it is used, the more the use can be extracted

from it. The same argument goes for the use of the Certified Karoo scheme and others. In principle it is a tool to set apart a very specific product and to reap its value fully requires producers to use it and to shape it to fit its intended purpose to achieve the desired outcomes. Indifference to such efforts to set apart a product and production process like for Certified Karoo Meat of Origin allows the marketing of unique product to revert back to the commodity norm that most producers seek to escape.