



resurgence of the lambs

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Travel back far far into the dim recesses of human’s past and you’ll find lamb.

Travel to Narrogin and you'll find innovation.

IN THE BIBLE, lambs featured large as both a symbol of innocence and goodness and something to be sacrificed. Superstitions abounded surrounding the lamb: if the first lamb of spring was black, it was a good omen. Twin white ones brought excellent fortune. The Irish considered it good luck to meet a white lamb in the early morning with the sunlight on its face. In Richmond, Virginia a heavy metal band is called Lamb of God.

A bit of luck, a little iconography and alternatively crunchy and searing Aeolian riffs are all well and good but they’re not what makes the cut in a competitive meat industry.

For WA Q Lamb, the Western Australian Alliance that raises, slaughters, prepares and distributes some 300,000 lambs per year, lamb is an excellent product that deserves to be done well and done right.

“Lamb makes for good eating and good cooking,” says Peter “Polly” Trefort, Managing Director of Hillside Meats and the driving force behind Q Lamb. “It’s a pleasurable experience. And it brings us a good return.”

However, this wasn’t always the case – or perception – in Western Australia, and Peter has dedicated his career to turning around the quality and hence poor image, lamb once suffered as meat to eat.

“If you go back in Australian history, lamb was produced as an offshoot of the wool industry,” explains Peter. “Its weight was about 12 to 15 kilos and just about all of it was exported to the Middle East. None of it was produced for local consumption. It was as recent as 15 years ago that this changed.

“Most flocks were made up of purely merino sheep and there were no real British breeds or cross breeds which make for much better meat sheep. Plus, because of our Mediterranean climate, we only had good product for four months of the year.”

The reality for lamb farmers was that the market would fluctuate erratically and not

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bring in a consistent return: in spring a glut would flood the market resulting in low prices, in winter a dearth of fresh lamb would force prices to skyrocket.

“So, [as a State] we didn’t eat a lot of lamb,” Peter continues, “it wasn’t good and people saw it as too lean, too bony with not a good selection of cuts because they were too small.”

Peter set about changing all that.

In 1995, together with Alan Jarman, a former consultant for Lambplan – a national system developed to improve the genetics of meat sheep in Australia and make them more profitable – Peter formed a group comprised of 11 members, who, as breeders of lamb products, embarked on establishing standards and protocols to ensure quality lamb all year round.

To achieve this, Peter believed it had to start with the farmer. “It was necessary to encourage people to do the right thing on how to produce lamb properly,” he says.

For consumers to be interested in lamb, the animals needed to be larger and the meat juicier, more tender, less fatty and less stressed during the transportation and slaughtering process. With low rainfalls and poor quality pastures, a radical new approach to raising lambs was required. Additionally, lamb species suitable for eating needed to be introduced into the predominantly wool merino stock.

Thus, they began working with researchers to develop a feeding regime that would revolutionise lamb production and greatly improve quality and consistency. Instead of coming straight off the paddock and a grass diet, lambs spent two months being fed grain in a controlled diet. Lamb weight

increased dramatically and carcasses are now typically 21 kilos or more. Considered to be technology pioneers in the world of lamb feeding, their feed methods are now being adopted in other states and countries.

In fact, Peter’s work with feeding regimes, breeding and genetics earned him an Honorary Doctorate in Science at Murdoch University in December 2006.

As well as producing excellent quality lambs the Alliance needed to ensure their abattoirs were of the highest standards. Hillside Meats – which is Peter’s family owned-and-run abattoir and the sole processing plant for WA Q Lamb – has the highest A+ rating from the national meat standards body, AUS-MEAT. And Hillside is the only abattoir in Western Australia registered to process lamb with the Meat Standards Australia (MSA) guarantee of quality. In 2000, Hillside won



AUS-MEAT's lamb processor of the year for the whole of Australia.

Today, the Alliance has over 200 members producing lamb to the Q Lamb standard. With controlled feeding techniques ensuring a year-round supply of lambs, the abattoir can guarantee farmers "killspace" to ensure their lambs are processed at the right time, when the farmers and their lambs are ready.

"If they do the job right, they'll get the money for them," says Peter. "It gives the farmers the assurance they'll sell their lambs when they're ready and not suffer from the whims of the market. And of course we can guarantee a minimum price. So this is a good incentive for farmers to stay in the industry... some can make more money by growing grain but 80 percent have stuck with sheep."

However, the Q Lamb food chain doesn't stop there. Good quality meat needs to be expertly packed and distributed to guarantee freshness and the Alliance takes care of this as well. Chillers are programmed to ensure correct temperatures are maintained. Agreements with suppliers such as IGA Supermarkets specify consistent cabinet packing charts and displays across all stores. And consumers are assured a quality product every time.

"Good lamb should be a nice pink colour and texture and the bone nice and white," advises Peter. "The fat should be white, not dark or off colour. The cuts are all pretty much the same in quality; there's not one especially better than another."

The export market is also hungry for Q Lamb. With accreditation for Halal processing, Q Lamb airfreights between 1800 and 2700 lamb carcasses to the Middle East and worldwide each week. Because of Halal codes of practice, lamb preparation for export is a sprightly business. As part of their commitment, Q Lamb ensures that lambs are slaughtered, packed, shipped and available for Muslim markets within 48 hours.

Peter's 3000 acre family farm in Narrogin was the birthplace of WA's Q Lamb. His grandparents landed there in 1892, breeding lambs and doing a bit of dairying. Now in its fourth generation, the family business is thriving. Two of Peter's children work on the management side of the abattoir: Peter Jnr is CEO and Cathi is Employment Manger, while his other daughter Deb opted to become a nurse, but still helps out around the farm when she can. Peter's wife Dot is the company secretary.

"We certainly eat a lot of lamb," chuckles Peter, whose favourite dish is rack of lamb or easy carve leg (deboned and rolled) roasted to perfection.

"You can't go far wrong with lamb," he enthuses. "It's very forgiving when you cook it and it doesn't take long to cook. It wants to be eaten on the medium side, rather than overcooking it." Peter recommends.

And does lamb bring good luck or excellent fortune? Well, Q Lamb is testament to that.

