

DOWN ON MINT CREEK FARM

Biodynamically Delicious

BY LISA FUTTERMAN

Mint Creek Farmer Harry Carr is a talkative guy, and most days at Chicago's Green City Market he has plenty of opportunity to chat. While all around him hungry foodies are lining up for Seedling Fruit smoothies and Iron Creek heirloom tomatoes, Harry schools swarms of potential customers about the virtues of his grass fed lamb (plus soil fertility and rotational grazing, when asked nicely). Anyone who tries a grilled spring lamb loin chop from Harry's farm will fight for the chance to grill another one. (Spring lamb is harvested at 3 months of age. Having been fed mostly mother's milk, the tender meat is also quite mild in flavor. Fall lamb grazes in Harry's Stelle, Illinois, pastures until 8 months of age, adding a more complex flavor and texture.) But here's the thing—Harry's small herd of 430 grass fed ewes yields only so many preferred lamb chops per season, leaving Harry and his family to sell what's left. I spent the summer feasting on Mint Creek's less popular meats—the less sought after (and less expensive) cuts of lamb and goat that are prized by bolder diners. Here's what I learned:

- Less popular cuts of meat are often more flavorful than their expensive counterparts.
- Tougher cuts of meat like shoulder chops and leg steaks must be treated differently than the tender, pricey loins, but a lower, slower cooking method, in Harry's words, "makes for some darn good eating." Bargain buys like lamb ribs, stew meat, and leg steaks can be transformed into melt in your mouth dishes, including ethnic dishes as diverse as Greek Moussaka, Nepalese Curry, Mongolian Lamb, Shepherd's Pie, and Lamb Cacciatore—which all call for economical cuts of lamb (or even goat, but more on that later).
- Mint Creek also offers meaty lamb bacon and a wide array of lamb sausages, including brats, chorizo, and breakfast sausage (which makes a delicious addition to stuffing for the holiday bird). Ground lamb should not be overlooked—think grilled lamburgers with feta cheese, or lamb stroganoff with cremini mushrooms.
- Organ meats can be delicious and are rich in nutrients.

Harry brightly reminds his customers that in traditional Chinese philosophy, organs are *qi meats*, and therefore eating *his* kidneys is good for *your* kidneys. Whether health or economy is the precipitating factor for "nose to tail" eating, don't be surprised by how tasty the results are. One of this season's most memorable meals rolled out like this: sautéed lamb liver (hint: soak it in milk for just 30 minutes before cooking to create a milder flavor), bacon, sweet market onions



caramelized with cherry tomatoes, and braised Green Acres Tuscan kale. When Mint Creek staffer Nat Bjerke-Harvey hosted an organ meat pot-luck party to prove just how tasty and user-friendly all that offal can be, his enthusiastic friends stepped up with such delicacies as Braised Goat Heart Tacos, Country Lamb Pate, and Spicy Stir-fried Sweetbreads. The platters were licked clean. "We learned," says Bjerke-Harvey, "that a good long braise on most any organ meat produces a great texture; everyone was shocked and left very full and

Photo by Ann Flood

happy.” Lamb’s tongue braises beautifully, and, for the more daring, lamb’s fries (the friendly name for testicles) become a delicacy (and perhaps a conversation piece) when breaded and fried.

GOAT IS TRENDY AND TASTY

A journalist friend in New York City told me that he’d recently noticed lots of food stories in the national press about goat meat. A quick internet search proved him right: the July 2008 issue of *Gourmet* featured a recipe for a Mexican braised goat taco; Janet Fletcher’s July 30th story in the *San Francisco Chronicle* covered hip Bay area restaurants that serve goat, and *Time Magazine* reported the trend with an August 14th piece featuring internationally influenced goat recipes.

Goat meat commonly graces the table in Greece, the Caribbean, Mexico, India, and Italy, and grass fed goat meat like Mint Creek’s has a sweet, mild, almost herbal flavor, like their spring lamb. This meaty summer my friends and I cooked and enjoyed tender herb-roasted goat rack chops and meaty braised goat leg.

I asked the decidedly un-trendy Harry how and why he got into the goat business. “Completely unintended,” he laughed. “I was visiting a nearby farm and this goat stuck her head through the fence and looked at me.” Her current caretaker was not milking her properly, and the next thing she knew she was coming home with Harry. Twenty more Boer goats (the breed known as the best meat producers) soon followed.

What’s next for Harry Carr’s Mint Creek Farms? The morning of our interview, five grass-fed 18 month-old Angus calves moved in. And Harry is particularly proud of his first set of organic grain and grass fed turkeys ready just in time for the holidays. “Organic turkey feed is twice the price of regular grain,” says Carr, passing on his typical approachable logic, “but these birds probably taste twice as good too.” 🐐

Lisa Futterman loves a good adventure in food. An accomplished chef and writer, she’s on the cutting edge of food trends, especially when the dinner invitation is billed as an “organ meat pot-luck party.” Pass the goat tacos, please.

You can find Harry and Gwen Carr of Mint Creek Farm at the Green City Market year round. Also at Logan Square and the 61st Street Farmers Market. You can also purchase product online and learn more about the Carr’s Family Farm by visiting their website at: www.mintcreekfarm.com. Market websites: www.chicagoreencitymarket.org; www.experimentalstation.org; www.logansquarefarmersmarket.org

Photo by RJ Liscum

