

GET YOUR GOAT

IOWA PRODUCERS OFFER A PLACE AT THE WORLD'S TABLE

BY KRISTINE JEPSEN

Goats? In Iowa? Er, yes—and, it's a little embarrassing that we haven't noticed them before, nibbling away at our ignorance and settling into local food culture (or local-ture).

Capra aegagrus hircus were among the earliest domesticated animals, and the 800 million of them alive today represent the most widely distributed livestock in the world, according to the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations.

But until the early 1990s, American meat goat production was mostly backyard science—heritage supported by people with a cultural connection to chevon, as goat is known gastronomically (hence chèvre, the French term for goat cheese).

Muslim Americans prefer goat kids less than a year old for Ramadan and the breaking of its fast, for example. Hispanic folks know goat as *cabrito* and *seco de chivo*. African, Indian, European, Chinese, Australian, and Caribbean traditions also cultivate discriminating taste for kids, does/nannies, and bucks/billies.

So perhaps it's no surprise that an industry came barreling into existence in the U.S. 1993, when the Boer meat breed (finally) arrived in Texas from the Netherlands, beefing up the bloodlines of various dairy breeds already ashore.

In our Iowa River Valley, the story is simple, says Bonnie Lapke, marketing director and co-founding farmer of Iowa Healthy Edge Meats, a consortium of five family goat farms based in West Union. "People of different ethnic groups are coming to Iowa, and they know goat." They also know the stuff that gets imported can taste like it's traveled (literally) from another continent.

Carving a niche since mid-2006, Lapke and company raise and direct-market antibiotic- and hormone-free chevon under the brand Heartland Pride to grocery stores and restaurants. Common cuts include chops, ground chevon, cubed stew meat, pressed patties, and boneless leg of goat. Animals are less than 6 months of age and weigh 60 to 80 pounds at harvest.

At the same time, the Iowa Meat Goat Association (IMGA) binds together another 136 hobbyists and entrepreneurs statewide who direct-market goats on their farms, often by word of mouth. Special processing, including halaal-certified butchering, has evolved regionally to meet consumer preference.

Retail prices range from about \$5 per pound for ground chevon to more than \$10 per pound for choice chops, roasts, and prized boneless leg. And its taste?

"Mellow, with the texture of pork and a hint of venison," says Myron Smalley, the farmer behind Iowa City Boers and treasurer of the IMGA.

Lapke adds that chevon's distinctive flavor isn't as prominent as the taste of lamb, in comparison. "My children eat goat all the time," she explains. "You can serve it any way you're used to using ground meat, and people tell me off-handedly that they sometimes mistake it for beef."

Chevon is also in the public eye because it looks dietetically trim at the meat counter. A 3-ounce serving contains 2.58 grams of fat and fewer calories than beef, pork, lamb and chicken, while boasting more iron and just as much protein.

This biochemical profile reveals that up to 60 percent of a goat's diet is "browse," or diverse forage of foliage and seeds. In fact, goats are notorious for feasting on nearly anything 12 inches tall or better, selectively nipping at, pulling down, stripping, and munching the best eats, usually without discriminating between, say, pasture grasses, thistle buds, and ornamental perennials prized by their owners.

Efficient and compact (mature Boer bucks are still under 350 pounds), goats fit the undulating topography of both the Iowa River Valley and modern diversified agriculture. "I have a small farm and small kids," Lapke says. "Goats are physically manageable and viable as a family enterprise on just a few acres."

Goats are also good at amusing themselves, making them entertaining to raise. "They'll pull on each others' collars just to hear them jingle, and play keep-away with paper bags, feed sacks or anything else that crinkle-crinkles to their satisfaction," says Terri Webb, a dairy and meat goat producer near Cresco. Given the chance, goat kids will hop from the bumper to the hood to the roof of a truck, just to clatter around and survey their scene from forbidden heights.

"Unlike cattle, goats will remember where they got out of a fence," Smalley adds. "The second they know you're not happy, they'll scamper back through the smallest of openings and then look at you like, 'What? Me?'" (Would-be goat farmers take heart, though—two strands of hotwire at 1 foot and 2 feet off the ground do nicely.)

All told, however, goats trump their peculiarities with very lowan good-naturedness, Lapke explains. "They're fun to work with—and they're the reason I'm able to get back to farming with my family."

Smalley seconds the sentiment. "I got one goat because I wanted to control some multiflora rose," he says, then chuckles. "That was 15 years ago."

Kristine Jepsen writes from the field -- literally -- as half of Grass Run Farm and as a local foods advocate near Dorchester, Iowa. Inspired to tell the story of various curiosities and challenges, Kristine has contributed to several community-based journals on land and the web.

Photograph by Kurt Michael Friese



HOW TO GET YOUR GOAT

Buy Heartland Pride chevon by the cut in Hy-Vee stores up and down the Iowa River Valley. For locations, see www.IowaHealthyEdgeMeats.com or call 563.543.4270.

To purchase a goat (or part of one) and learn more about goat production, find a farmer through www.LocalHarvest.org or Iowa State's MarketMaker directory: www.IA.MarketMaker.uiuc.edu, or visit www.IowaMeatGoat.com

RECIPES

Jamaican Goat Curry

from Karen Palmersheim's Farm Bureau 2006 Cook-off Recipes

2 pounds goat stew meat
1 large onion, chopped
1 garlic clove, minced
1 hot pepper, chopped and seeded
2 tablespoon curry powder
salt and pepper to taste
2 tablespoon vegetable oil
2 cups water

Cube meat. Combine with the onion, garlic, hot pepper, curry powder, salt, and pepper; marinate for one hour.

Heat oil in a skillet over medium heat and brown the meat and vegetables until evenly cooked. Add the water, cover, and simmer for 1 hour. Adjust seasonings to taste, and add more water if needed. Continue to cook until meat is tender, 20-25 minutes.

Serve over rice. This recipe is also great with potatoes or other vegetables.

Chevon Chops-on-a-Stick with Bourbon Cherry Glaze

from Iowa Healthy Edge Meats

Marinate chevon chops (bone-in rib chops) 3 hours in herb and garlic marinade (such as Lawry's).

Season meat with your favorite rub—we like Excalibur Ultimate Steak & Roast Rub.

Grill on low heat until meat reaches "medium" doneness—an internal temperature of 135 degrees.

Baste with butter (optional), and serve warm with bourbon cherry glaze, if you like.

Bourbon Cherry Glaze

Sauté dried cherries lightly in butter and a little sugar. Simmer until cherries are soft. Flame off ¼ cup bourbon. Add glaze to chops and serve warm.