

Direct to your door

Paul Larkins made his way to the Scottish Highlands in search of great tasting beef and found you too can enjoy just that... and you don't have to leave the house!

It's praise indeed when a new customer deliberately goes out of her way on the following day to return to the market stall she bought a rump steak from to tell those who sold her the meat just how great it was. And it's even more impressive to learn she's singing the praises of a piece of meat she cooked in the bottom of a saucepan outside her tent on the campsite she was visiting in Highland Perthshire.

"The best piece of steak I've had," she laughs, telling all and sundry just how tender and succulent it was despite her using rudimentary facilities, before demanding to know if there was any more!

The good news is there is indeed plenty more where that came from and better – its flavour-rich taste is so much finer if you don't have to cook it in a saucepan.

"It's great to hear stories like that," says Alex Brewster of Atholl Glens, the meat producers who sold this satisfied customer her evening meal. "It was piece of rump that we cut into thirds for her and that was it. As you can see, it's the quality of the beef that really counts," he adds, insisting I cut into a freshly cooked piece.

And that is the area farmers of Atholl Glens excel in. Forming a family farming cooperation of eight farms in 2004, the Atholl Glens organic meat box scheme home rears that wonderful, succulent organic beef our camping lady praised so much, on what can only be described as the finest land in the country. Nestling at the very start of the Scottish Highlands, the farms enjoy not only sensational scenery, but rich cattle-friendly hills. Food miles here are best measured in feet, or for the customer, even smaller



Why organic is best

- It's healthy – organic food contains higher levels of vitamins and essential minerals
- No damaging additives
- Freedom from pesticide contamination, such as weed killers and fungicides
- GM free – genetically modified (GM) crops and feed are not permitted on organic farms
- Antibiotics routine use banned – concern over effect on human health from high use of antibiotics in many conventional livestock systems
- Quality assured – organic food comes from trusted sources. Regular inspections of all organic farms to ensure the high European standards are maintained
- Animal welfare – organic standards tightly control all aspects of rearing, shelter, feeding and transportation
- Good for wildlife and the environment – no contamination from artificial fertilisers, reduced pollution and soil erosion
- Taste – most important of all many people and top chefs buy organic meat and vegetables just because they taste better than conventional products.



increments, as Atholl Glens meat is delivered mail order directly to your front door. All you need to do is place your order by telephone or the internet and wait while prime cuts and choice meats wing their way to you from Atholl Glens.

"We raise everything ourselves," says Alex. "We breed our own replacements, so biosecurity is very tight." By that he means outside diseases find it tough to establish themselves in his herds, which enjoy everything the land has to offer in terms of feed. "As you can see we grow our own clover, which is the backbone of organic farming," says Alex waving his arm in the direction of thousands of acres of the stuff. "Red is great for silage, while white is good for grazing. We're pretty much self-sufficient because of it."

It's not an exaggeration to say the cooperation farms make up what is probably the biggest continuous stretch of organic production in the land. It all came about when a group of tenant farmers on Atholl Estates decided to go

organic. All are the latest generation of family farmers on the Estates and with the formation of Atholl Glens it has allowed the farmers to provide the original raw simplicity of their product organically. And they haven't looked back since.

Mind, it's easy to see why. Farming in Highland Perthshire is spectacular and the wildlife on display around the sheep and cattle is amazing. "I love to spend a day up here; the way we farm encourages so much wildlife it's amazing," says Alex as we check on the self-sufficient sheep that live on the higher ground. "The wee beasties fascinate me," he says with a smile, referring to the birds, mammals and insects that make up this landscape. Being a city boy I can't help but ask how on earth it's possible to ensure all the sheep are rounded up when the time comes, such is the rugged, unforgiving nature of the land. "Well we do have the odd wild one that hides in the heather," Alex laughs, "but on the whole, working with dogs,

you'll get them all in."

And as they say: the proof is in the pudding. Atholl Glens' ultimate goal is to create a great eating experience. Heather-fed lamb and beef that displays wonderful marbling ensure that. If you look at supermarket beef, for instance, on the whole it doesn't contain such fat content, but it is that that creates the taste we're looking for.

"The other day we had a chap come by and visit us at one of the farmers' markets. He's an Aberdonian and they're notoriously tight," laughs Alex. "I knew we'd struggle to impress him, but anyway he tried a free piece of cooked meat we had and then wandered off. As he finished it, he stopped turned around and came back to tell us: 'that was great'.

That's all we need to hear." ●

For a full range of Atholl Glens' organic meats go to www.athollglens.co.uk or telephone: 01796 481482.

7 reasons to buy British

With the cost of meat likely to rise due to increased animal feed costs, the organisers of British Food Fortnight, which took place 22nd September to 7th October, gave consumers seven reasons to buy British meat:

1. British meat is produced to some of the highest welfare standards in the world; no growth-promoting hormones are allowed and any antibiotics are administered only under veterinary direction.
2. Britain's cattle passport system means that each animal can be uniquely traced to its dam and place of birth.
3. Britain's pig farmers operate by UK law to standards of welfare that are not only higher than those outside the EU but are higher than those of nearly every other EU member state; so think twice before buying that packet of pork, bacon or ham with the words 'product of the EU'. There is a 70% chance that it comes from a farming system that would be illegal in Britain.
4. Britain's beef and sheep industries are the envy of the world; breeding livestock and genetics from our native breeds are much sought after by farmers in other countries. Protect our great native livestock industry by buying the real thing, not some imported substitute.
5. British meat travels less far from farm to shop so regardless of how carbon footprints are calculated it self-evidently has a lower carbon footprint.
6. Don't be misled by supermarket packaging that can make British and imported meat look similar. Look for the origin information and evidence of British flags and assurance marks.
7. Choosing British meat means supporting British livestock farmers whose husbandry helps to keep the British countryside the way we want it to look – no cows, no countryside!

Alexia Robinson, organiser of British Food Fortnight, said: "British meat is the best in the world, but if we don't make an active effort to buy it when we are shopping or eating out it quite simply will not be available in 50 years time because most of our livestock farmers will have gone out of business."



Crispy beef with broccoli

Serves 2

300g (11oz) Atholl Glen's minute steaks or sirloin steaks sliced into thin strips

3 tsp corn flour

Small head of broccoli cut into florets

2 cloves sliced ginger

3cm piece of ginger finely sliced

Finely chopped dried chilli flakes

1 tsp dark soy sauce mixed with

5 tsp sugar and the juice of 2

limes

4 spring onions sliced diagonally.

METHOD

Toss the steak with the corn flour. Heat a 2cm depth of oil in a frying pan until very hot. Fry the steak in batches until dark and crisp. Drain. Pour off most of the oil and stir-fry the broccoli, garlic, ginger and chilli for 1 minute. Tip in the sweetened soy sauce and lime juice and cook for 2 minutes. Toss in the beef and spring onions and serve.



Baked stuffed aubergines

Serves 4

4 small, or 8 baby aubergines

vegetable oil, for frying

1 tbsp olive oil, plus extra for drizzling

1 large onion finely chopped

4 garlic cloves, finely chopped

1-2 red or green chillies, according to your taste, deseeded and finely chopped

1 tsp sugar

2 tbsp each currants and pine nuts

1 tbsp each ground cinnamon and garam masala

1 tsp ground turmeric

250g (9oz) Atholl Glens minced lamb

Small bunch coriander leaves, finely chopped (leaving some to serve)

2 tomatoes, sliced

Lemon slices, to serve

METHOD

Pre-heat the oven 200°C (180°C Fan, 400°F, gas 6. Make the filling: Heat the olive oil in a heavy-based pan, add the onions, garlic and chillies and cook, stirring often, until fragrant. Add the sugar, currants and pine nuts, and fry until the onions are golden. Stir in the ground spices, season, turn off the heat and leave to cool.

Tip the lamb into a bowl. Add the cooled onion and spice mixture, then the coriander, and season. Using your hands, knead the ingredients together until they are well mixed, then set aside.

Cut the aubergines in half, keeping the stalk intact. Heat a thin layer of vegetable oil in the heavy-based pan. Fry the aubergines until they



are soft and golden brown all over, about 6-8mins. Remove with a slotted spoon and place them side-by-side in a baking dish. Using a sharp knife, slit each one lengthways down the middle to form a pocket - don't cut through the ends or the base. Stuff the lamb filling into each one and place 2-3 slices tomato on top of each one. You can prepare the stuffed aubergines to this stage and chill before cooking, up to a day ahead.

Drizzle a little olive oil over the top, cover the dish with foil and bake for about 40mins, or until cooked through. Remove from oven and discard foil. Cook again, uncovered, for 10mins until the tomato has lightly caramelised. To serve, sprinkle a little chopped coriander over the top and squeeze over lemon slices.





Lamb skewers with peppery lime marinade

Serves 4

500g (1lb 2oz) Atholl Glens Organic lean lamb neck fillet
2 green chillies, seeded and roughly chopped
3 garlic cloves, roughly chopped
? tsp cracked black peppercorns
? tsp ground cinnamon
? tsp ground cardamom or crushed cardamom seeds
juice of 2 large limes
1 tbsp vegetable or sunflower oil

METHOD

Cut the lamb into 2cm thick slices and tip into a bowl. Blitz the chillies in a blender with the garlic, peppercorns, cinnamon, cardamom, lime juice and oil. Pour it over the lamb and mix well. Cover the bowl tightly with filmwrap and chill in the fridge for at least 30 minutes, or up to 4 hours.

Thread the lamb onto steel or soaked wooden skewers and cook under a pre-heated grill for 7-10 minutes, turning once. When the lamb is tender, tip any juices from the grill tray into a small saucepan. Cook on a medium heat until syrupy.

Pour the spiced glaze over the juicy skewers and serve with a crispy salad, ripped up bread and mint chutney.



Slow cooked lamb with onions and thyme

Serves 4

**Half a leg of Atholl Glens Organic lamb
(about 1.25kg/2lb 12oz)**

1kg (2lb) onions (about 4 large ones)

Handful of thyme sprigs

300ml (½ pint) red wine

Large handful parsley

METHOD

Firstly, prepare the lamb. Heat the oven to 160°C (325°F, 140°C fan, gas 3). Wipe the meat all over and season well. Heat 3tbsp of olive oil in a large heavy flameproof casserole; add the meat and fry

all over on a fairly high heat for about 8mins, turning until it is evenly well browned. Remove to a plate.

Thinly slice the onions. Add to the pan and fry for about 10mins, until softened and tinged with brown. Add a few of the thyme sprigs and cook for a further minute or so. Season with salt and pepper.

Sit the lamb on top of the onions, and then add the wine. Cover tightly. Bake for 3 hours. You can make to this stage up to 2 days in advance, and then reheat for 45mins.

To finish off, strip the leaves from 2 thyme sprigs and chop them with the parsley. Scatter over before serving.

