

Atholl Glens' organic option drives mutton's renaissance

MUTTON IS an exceptional meat, enjoying a revival in British kitchens thanks to the championing of Prince Charles and of celebrity chefs such as Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall and Gordon Ramsay.

That's why Atholl Glens' organic meat business has decided to offer mutton for the first time, in whole or half sheep boxes at the touch of a button. This unique partnership, believed to be the only one in Scotland, between the historic Atholl Estates in Highland Perthshire and its tenant farmers, is now offering the public the chance to have Highland mutton delivered direct to their doors via mail order from www.athollglens.co.uk.

Once the staple meat in Britain for hundreds of years, with some considering it far superior in flavour and texture to lamb, mutton has virtually disappeared from British menus over the last 50 years. Poor quality meat available during World War II gave mutton a reputation as being tough and, since then, changes in farming and cooking led to its decline.

Now, mutton is making a strong comeback. The 'Mutton Renaissance' campaign was launched in 2004 by the Prince of Wales, to support British sheep farmers who were struggling to sell their older animals, and to get this delicious meat back on the nation's plates.

Celebrity chef, Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, in his 'River Cottage Meat Book', says: "The word about mutton is starting to get around. Smart chefs are already putting it on their menus, and a few enlightened butchers are beginning to market it as something rather special."

People are beginning to take far more interest in their food, taking an interest in the welfare of the animals and wanting to know they have been well produced in a natural environment.

The slow food movement has contributed to people spending more time in the kitchen, preparing real home-cooked food once more, and mutton fits in perfectly with this philosophy. Best cooked slowly, mutton is perfect for roasting, stewing, casseroles or in a slow-cooker.

Atholl Glens offers mutton in two boxes — the half-sheep Glen Loch selection, ideal as an introduction to this special meat, or the whole-sheep Glen Derby selection, which is perfect for aficionados or for sharing amongst friends and family, and it also comes with free delivery to your door.

■ For some tasty recipe ideas to help you make the most of your foray into mutton, click on www.athollglens.co.uk.



Mutton and turnip pie

Ingredients:

1kg neck fillet of mutton, cut into 2cm pieces
50g of plain flour
2 large onions, peeled and chopped
Vegetable oil
Small sprig of rosemary
Salt and pepper to season
1.5litres of chicken or lamb stock
400-450g turnip, peeled and cut into 2-3cm chunks
250-300g puff pastry, rolled out to 1/2cm thick
1 medium egg, beaten

Place the flour, salt, pepper and chopped onion into a polythene bag. Add the diced neck fillet and shake until the meat is coated in seasoned flour.

Heat the vegetable oil in a heavy-bottomed saucepan and fry the pieces of mutton a few at a time until they are all browned. Add the rosemary, onion and stock and bring to the boil. Simmer gently for 1 1/2 to 2 hours until the mutton is tender. Add the turnips, and a little water if necessary, cover and simmer for a further 15 minutes until the turnip is cooked. Remove from the heat and leave to cool.

When the mixture has cooled, transfer it to a pie dish. Cover with the rolled out pastry and seal the edges with beaten egg. Cut a small slit in the middle of the pastry lid to let the steam escape.

Cook in the oven at 200°C for 40-45 minutes.

Delicious served with mashed potatoes, carrots and buttered cabbage.