

November

Official Magazine of the American Culinary Federation

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A Lamb for All Seasons

Chefs innovate, experiment with this versatile product.

By Lauren Kramer

Remember when lamb on the menu welcomed spring? Those were the days when a restaurant's lamb offerings were mostly predictable. Not so today. Chefs are introducing their guests to a range of dishes that use all kinds of lamb cuts in flavorful ways.

At the French bistro Almond in Bridgehampton, N.Y., owner Jason Weiner features lamb year-round, calling it his favorite meat. "We serve lamb 'bacon' in summer with squash blossoms and fresh herbs, and in winter, I'll do a cured lamb 'bacon' with root-vegetable ragoût, using the lamb belly," he says.

Lamb is so versatile that it allows chefs lots of leeway, but Weiner cautions

against getting too elaborate. "Some combinations, such as lamb with mint jelly, are classic mainstays for a reason—they taste great together," he says. "With lamb, you can really take three or four ingredients you believe in, put them on the plate and walk away. Don't feel you have to go with layer upon layer of flavors to add complexity, because you often end up with a muddled mess."

For Tyler Brown, executive chef at The Capitol Grille, The Hermitage Hotel, Nashville, Tenn., those four ingredients are spaghetti squash with pumpkin-seed pesto, tomato confit and smoked maitake mushroom, served with a rack of American lamb. The dish was introduced on the menu last

Duane Keller's American "lambsticks" with port-infused fig/apricot chutney is popular with diners at Moon Bay Coastal Cuisine, even though it's a sustainable-seafood restaurant.



American Lamb Board

What's in a name?

As American palates begin to learn the difference between American lamb and lamb imported from Australia and New Zealand, it's more important than ever for chefs to recognize the source of their lamb, says Duane Keller, executive chef at Moon Bay Coastal Cuisine in National Harbor, Md.

"Know your vendors and foster good relationships with them," he advises. "The Virginia lamb I feature once in a while is a lot different from Colorado lamb, though they're both domestic. So if you're going to feature domestic lamb, go to the next step and mention where it's from."

Interest in locally raised lamb has soared in recent years, according to Megan Wortman, executive director of the American Lamb Board, Denver, who says consumption of U.S. versus imported lamb is split 50-50 in the United States. There are distinct differences between American and imported lamb, she says.

"Ours is fresher, local and has a different flavor because it's finished on grain, so it's not as gamey as Australian lamb," Wortman says. "We're finding chefs really wanting to support local lamb farmers and producers, and they are mentioning specific farms on the menu."

fall and was featured for six months. Brown reintroduced it this fall. "I love to pay homage to the pumpkin and squash this time of year," he says. "It's not too rich or too much for people, and the tomatoes, mushrooms and squash go really well together."

Get creative

Lamb demand has increased by 5.7% over the past 10 years, and there is great potential for further increase, particularly in the foodservice sector, according to

a 2007 lamb analysis conducted for the Denver-based American Lamb Board by Juniper Economic Consulting, Inc., Collbran, Colo.

Megan Wortman, the board's executive director, says chefs are becoming more creative with the lamb cuts they're featuring. "We're seeing innovative and increased use of less-expensive cuts, such as the legs and belly, as well as movement into appetizers, small plates, sandwiches and salads featuring lamb," she says.

"With lamb, you can really take three or four ingredients you believe in, put them on the plate and walk away."

—Jason Weiner



Green Olive Media

Tyler Brown serves rack of American lamb with spaghetti squash with pumpkin-seed pesto, tomato confit and smoked maitake mushroom at The Capitol Grille.

Weiner agrees that the belly is an underutilized part of lamb, which is unfortunate, he says, as it contains great flavor. "Ordinarily, it's just used for ground lamb, but we dry-cure it, sear it, add vegetables and lamb stock, and braise it for three hours until it's nice and tender. Then we'll press it, and serve it in little squares."

And while mint jelly is certainly a wonderful accompaniment to lamb,

Mediterranean influences has been well received. "It brings identification to other fruits and vegetables that add accent to the lamb, and brings new emphasis and awareness of this meat."

One diner, Reid recalls, was a missionary from Australia who had never liked lamb. "When she tried it this way, she loved it. If you can tweak your diners' imaginations of what they want to try for dinner, you can create an appetizing and really enticing meal."

Branch out

Keller says lamb can go beyond entrées into other parts of the menu. "I utilize a lot of dried fruit with acid, like sundried cherries, dried apricots and sundried cranberries with port. Lamb can be a great canvas for both appetizers and entrées, and there are absolutely no nos-nos when it comes to what's possible."

As the weather gets cooler, and dinners become more of a gathering with friends and family, Keller slows down the lamb cooking process and enjoys braising, roasting and simmering for hours. "Serve lamb with as many accompaniments as possible," he advises. "Remember, it's a great canvas for dry rubs, and to have a couple different chutneys and side dishes makes the dining experience that much better."

At Westchester Country Club in Rye, N.Y., executive chef Edward Leonard, CMC, AAC, offers a lamb-slider appetizer made from ground-up lamb shoulder on his bar

At The Lazy Goat in Greenville, S.C., executive chef Lindsay Autry braises lamb hind shanks with herbs and a Moroccan spice blend and serves it with warm pita, cucumber yogurt and plantain chips.

menu. "We make 2-ounce lamb burgers seasoned with oregano, garlic and lamb spice, and after grilling them, we put them on soft potato rolls topped with yogurt sauce," he says.

Another popular dish, particularly in the club's formal restaurant, is the lamb Caesar salad. Leonard marinates loin of lamb, slices it thinly and places it over Caesar salad, topping it with garlic chips. "I thought the strong flavor of lamb was a natural combination with Caesar salad, and the garlic chips on top makes for really nice eating," he says.

"Today's diners are looking for something different in terms of flavor profiles, and the advantage with lamb is that most people don't cook it at home. So if you team it up with the right combination and market and promote it properly, there's a great opportunity to get people to try different things."

And the club's diners are more than willing to try Leonard's lamb club sandwich. "This is a three-decker club. We bone out the blade chop and grill part of it, while breading and frying the other part," he says. "We put them on two layers of the sandwich, and serve the sandwich with pesto mayonnaise.



"People love club sandwiches and Caesar salad, and I find they will try different things—such as a lamb version of each of these dishes—when you team up the lamb with something they recognize and are used to ordering."

Lauren Kramer, an award-winning writer based in Vancouver, Canada, is passionate about gourmet food and delights in tasting it and writing about it.

A Lamb for

American Lamsickles with Port-infused Fig and Apricot Chutney

Duane Keller, Executive Chef
Moon Bay Coastal Cuisine
Gaylord National Resort and
Convention Center
National Harbor, Md.

Yield: 12 servings

3 American lamb racks, frenched
to rib eye
¼ cup olive oil
6 garlic cloves, minced
Salt and pepper, as needed
Port-infused Fig and Apricot Chutney
(recipe follows)
Dried apricots, figs and herbs,
for garnish

1) Brown each lamb rack on all sides.
2) Combine oil and garlic. Rub each
rack with mixture; season with salt and
pepper. Place on roasting rack; roast at
375°F for 25 to 28 minutes, or to desired
degree of doneness. 3) Remove from
oven. Cover; let rest. Slice between rib
chops. 4) To serve: Place spoonful of
chutney on each lamb rib chop; top with
3 julienne dried apricots. Garnish with
dried apricots, figs and fresh herbs,
if desired.

Port-infused Fig and Apricot Chutney

2 cups port wine
8 oz. light brown sugar, packed
4 shallots, chopped
1 lemon, zested

1 cinnamon stick
1 t. kosher salt
¼ t. ground allspice
¼ t. ground cloves
1 lb. firm fresh figs, rinsed,
stems removed, halved (or dried figs)
8 oz. dried apricot halves

Method: In large saucepan, combine port,
sugar, shallots, lemon zest, cinnamon
stick, salt, allspice and cloves. Bring to
a boil. Reduce heat; simmer until mixture
is thickened and reduced by ¾, forming
thick syrup. Remove cinnamon stick.
Add figs and apricots; cook gently for
approximately 30 minutes, or until figs are
very soft and begin to fall apart.

Brown suggests chefs broaden their horizons. "If you want to stick with the mint theme, look for different ways to bring the mint element into the dish—such as a mint pesto or a coulis or an oil. It's neat to try something new and explore, to look further than just what's in front of us."

Experimentation is the key to offering diners enticing, innovative lamb dishes, says Duane Keller, executive chef at Moon Bay Coastal Cuisine in National Harbor, Md. "It can take a lot of spice, as in tandoori lamb or curry, or you can let the lamb stand on its own, adding just

fresh thyme and some good red wine," he says. "It can be served all year round, and it's really not a tough meat to work with."

Keller features American "lamsickles" with port-infused fig and apricot chutney on his menu, and says despite the fact that Moon Bay is a sustainable-seafood restaurant, lamb remains a good seller. "Of our 600 covers a night, we can easily

serve up to 90 portions of lamb," he says. "It's a great meat to work with, and it sells well, even in a seafood restaurant."

John Reid, executive chef at Valparaiso University, Valparaiso, Ind., also likes the marriage of lamb and fruit. He opted to combine roasted American lamb rack with pomegranate molasses five years ago, and says this blend of

"If you want to stick with the mint theme, look for different ways to bring the mint element into the dish—such as a mint pesto or a coulis or an oil."

—Tyler Brown