

Mutton Renaissance Launched at The Ritz

November 2004

The Daily Telegraph, Friday 12th November 2004

Put mutton back on the national menu, urges Charles

By David Derbyshire, Consumer Affairs Editor



A campaign to restore mutton to its "rightful place" as one of Britain's favourite dishes was launched yesterday by the Prince of Wales.

At a gala luncheon at the Ritz Hotel, London, Prince Charles called for a revival of the "classic British dish" and took a swipe at the fast-food culture that had swept it to one side.

Warning that the rural landscape could become "rank and ungrazed" if family farmers were not protected, he said he hoped his efforts could help restore the fortunes of sheep farmers.



Head chef John Williams is at the Ritz restaurant

Once one of the most loved dishes, mutton's popularity declined after the last war. By the 1970s, nouvelle cuisine had helped to turn it into a byword for old-fashioned, tough and unpalatable meat.

The new campaign, called Mutton Renaissance, has won the backing of the farming, food and catering industry, as well as some of Britain's best known chefs - including Mark Hix, Michel Roux, Marco Pierre White, Anton Mosimann, Gary Rhodes and Antony Worrall Thompson.

Yesterday, after tucking into three mutton dishes prepared by the Ritz's head chef, John Williams, Prince Charles said his inspiration came after a visit to Teesdale sheep farmers who told him about the poor prices they were getting for older ewes.

"I remembered that when I was growing up that mutton was one of my favourite dishes, but that it had all but disappeared over the last 30 or 40 years," he said.

"Wouldn't it be wonderful, I thought, if we could help to boost the incomes of our hill farmers by encouraging a mutton renaissance?"

Traditionally mutton is meat from a sheep aged over two. To be at its best, the meat must be hung for at least two weeks. Its flavour emerges only after long, slow cooking.

In 1861 Mrs Beeton claimed: "Mutton is, undoubtedly, the meat most generally used in families. And, both by connoisseurs and medical men, it stands first in favour; whether its fine flavour, digestible qualifications, or general wholesomeness be considered".

But changing fashions, and the decline in post-war wool prices, contributed to its demise.

Over the past few decades, lamb has replaced mutton in the nation's hearts and most older ewes now go to ethnic communities.

Prince Charles - Patron of the Academy of Culinary Arts, which is backing the campaign with the National Sheep Association - said the revival of mutton could add value and stability to sheep markets and keep animals grazing the land for longer.

"We must ensure that things go on being grazed, otherwise we will end up with a rank and ungrazed countryside," he said.

"In a world where fast food seems to be the order of the day, this may be a message that takes time to percolate beyond the restaurants. But I know from the huge numbers of people who watch the cooking programmes on television that there are some who truly care about how they prepare and cook their food and so, for them, there is a whole new culinary treat in store."

Two of the mutton dishes Prince Charles enjoyed at the Ritz were prepared from sheep grazed at his Highgrove home in Gloucestershire.

Gary Rhodes said the campaign had revived his own interest in mutton and he now served a variant of Irish stew made from mutton encased in a suet pudding.

"It's a fantastic product and food to work with," he said. "It isn't simply about boiling and simmering, there's so much more that can be done. I've become inspired by it."

John Williams said mutton was becoming popular again. He served it once a week at the Ritz and it was always the most demanded dish.

"The reason it has gone out of fashion is that people have become impatient," he said. "But there's no extra work with mutton - it just needs an extra couple of hours."