

# Lamb Barbecue

written by Guest Contributor | July 25, 2018



By the time we got to the dusty park in Durham, California, with its canopy of towering valley oaks, the men—my dad, my granddad, dozens of others—had always been there cooking for hours. They had been drinking for hours, too. At the Lamb Barbecue, the annual picnic of the Butte County Wool Growers Association, there was always a line at the green table that served as a makeshift bar, but the guys cooking in their plaid Western shirts and felt hats didn't have to wait in it. They fished cold Bud out of ice chests as they built the trenches of coals to bury the Dutch ovens of lamb neck, shank, and riblet stew, and formed heaping piles of glowing coals for grilling the chops and spiced lamb patties. Huge pots of spicy-sweet beans simmered over coals, and foil pans of olives and pickled onions sat out on the tables. Fatty, fragrant smoke floated over the park, making the hot day hotter. In June in the Sacramento Valley, it was always hot.

A lamb or two always baaed in a pen a stone's throw away from where their compatriots sizzled over coals, part of a guess the weight contest. If you guessed the closest, later that lamb would be delivered to your house in white paper packages, including a mix of lamb burger from the same butcher who prepared everything for the barbecue. We never won, but we didn't need to, because my dad always bought a lamb or two at the Silver Dollar Fair, which takes place in Chico every Memorial Day weekend. Every year, my dad still buys a couple of lambs. He brings my brother and me half a lamb each, frozen hard in vacuum-sealed packages these days rather than butcher paper.

The guys didn't move on to the hard stuff—Wild Turkey, mostly—until afternoon, when the meat was finally ready. It was hard to choose between the earthy spice of a lamb patty and the rich, savory, oily riblet stew, a thick braise of falling-apart-tender meat and small bones and fat in white wine. The chops were good, too, but we ate lamb chops a lot at my house, taught early on to gnaw the bones for every scrap of gristle. I didn't know until I was much older that kids weren't supposed to like lamb, that people found it

too greasy, too strong, too gamy. In the winter months, we ate chicken-fried venison heart and wild pheasant my mom cooked in Campbell's Cream of Mushroom Soup, spiked with sherry. Compared to the meats my dad hunted, lamb was mild.

Though I didn't realize it until years later, the flavors of the Lamb Barbecue evoked the deep history of sheep farming in the north state, of long-ago Basque shepherders who saw a terrain—dry, rocky, mountain-hemmed pastureland—much like where they came from. It wasn't until later that other farmers would find that water could be harnessed to make that soil come alive with other, more valuable, more densely farmed crops.

After lunch, there were herding demonstrations, witless bleating sheep moving as a body and kicking up dust as border collies and cockeyed Australian sheepdogs nipped at their heels, and an auctioneer sold off sheepskin pelts. All of us kids made ourselves sick on little paper cups of Crystal vanilla ice cream with the tiny, tooth-scraping wooden paddles attached, and we spun on the fast metal merry-go-round until it seemed we truly would be sick. I liked to fish the melting ice out of spent drinks and suck the cubes for their faint bourbon flavor. Despite drinking all day, none of the guys ever seemed much the worse for wear to me, and my dad occasionally took a beer for the road after the last of the meat was finished and we left, tired and dirty and sticky, with me riding in the front seat of the pickup next to him, beer in hand, down the straight flat tree-lined Midway Road home to Chico.

By the time I was a child in the 1970s and 1980s, the Lamb Barbecue was already a relic, as were the Butte County Wool Growers. The last one I remember going to was sometime in the early 1990s, when I was in college. My grandfather, who came out from Kansas during the Depression to and worked for a relative with a large livestock operation for decades, was president of the Butte County Wool Growers in the early 1960s. By the 1970s, he had bought his own almond orchard, seeing a more profitable crop to come. My dad is a lawyer and a part-time almond farmer, who inherited and has augmented his father's land. Our acreage—200 levee-crisscrossed acres or so, set along Cherokee Creek between Durham and Richvale—is all silty, sandy alluvial land, perfect for nut trees. He calls his crop "ammins" (rhymes with salmon), in the odd regional pronunciation of the north valley farmers who grow them. I trained myself to quit saying it that way when I left home for college on the East Coast.

It turns out my grandfather and my dad chose well in getting out of ranching and into an orchard crop. These days, lamb meat comes to the United States mostly from Australia and New Zealand (with a growing import market from China, of all places), and Butte County no longer has an active Wool Growers Association (though neighboring counties—Glenn and Colusa—do have chapters in the statewide association). In 2013, the highest-value crop in Butte County was walnuts (\$285 million), followed by rice (\$200 million) and almonds (\$196 million). There remained some 2000 head of sheep in the county, worth a half million dollars; all the livestock in the county, mostly cattle, had a total value of some \$12 million, just under the value of the county's rice seed production.

My dad's orchard hosts doves and pheasants and hopping jackrabbits and deer

and even a beaver that dams the creek and damages the young trees. The rice fields nearby are landing pads for ducks and egrets, tundra swans and sandhill cranes and great blue herons, during the migration season that persists even as the north valley has been given over to ever more intensive agriculture. You'd be hard pressed, however, to find a sheep grazing anywhere nearby. Instead, on the other side of our dead-end gravel road lies rice fields and a few defunct kiwi orchards, themselves untended relics of the now largely spent 1980s craze for the fuzzy green fruit. (The 2013 value of the county's kiwis was close to \$5 million, as was that of its almond hulls, the dry seed coating used for livestock feed.) There's also a tallow plant on the east side of the highway; its rancid stench, like the evil ghost of the smoke from the Lamb Barbecue, is a pungent reminder that the livestock industry does remain in the county.

Our orchard lies about 15 miles as the crow flies from Oroville Dam, which became nationally famous last year when its spillway almost failed. From the high vantage points of our levees, you can see Mount Lassen on a clear day, and the high blue peaks of the Sierra Nevada ridgeline to the east, fronted with scrubby foothill buttes, and the farther, fainter, lower line of the Coast Range to the west. Out in the flats of the valley you can see the peaks of the Sutter Buttes, poking up in a lumpy silhouette perfectly mirrored in flooded rice fields. When we left the orchard to drive due north on 99, back to Chico, there were points on the highway when we could see Mount Shasta, its high white peak floating like a cloud over the tapering valley.

Growing up in the Sacramento Valley meant always knowing the cardinal directions. To this day, I feel unmoored, literally disoriented, when I can't see tall mountains to the east. These days I live in Sacramento, where the peaks to the east are higher but the slope of the mountains hemming in the valley is less precipitous, and the air quality is worse than it was 30 years ago. Only on the clearest days of stiff north wind that sometimes whips down the valley—from Nome, Alaska, my grandmother used to say—do the snowy peaks of the high Sierra float over Sacramento, or can you see Shasta on the way back to Chico from the orchard.

Every February, that wind is usually quiet for a week or so of false spring in the north valley, and that happens to coincide with the almond bloom, when the pinkish-white blossoms contrast perfectly with the gray levees and blue skies and bluer mountains. Then, some years, my dad and his friends bring out big pots of beans and make some kind of meaty braise—sometimes with lamb, sometimes with the game my dad still shoots at the orchard, sometimes with meat from the butcher. We're missing some things at the blossom party. There's no green picnic table serving as a bar, and no merry-go-round, and no lamb in a pen nearby, and no June heat. But people still drink beer while a rich stew cooks and pile their plate high when it's ready, and it still feels like a celebration.

### **Lamb Neck and Riblet Stew**

Note: In this simple, rustic stew, which at the Lamb Barbecue was cooked in cast-iron Dutch ovens in a trench of hot coals, tough, cheap cuts of lamb that might otherwise go to waste braise until meltingly tender. Lamb neck and

riblets (or breast pieces; don't be tempted to spend a premium on expensive rib chops) are available at many butcher counters; cross-cut shanks also work well here. This recipe, reconstructed from memories of the Lamb Barbecue original, uses an oven. If you happen to have a trench of hot coals available, though, go for it. Serve with crusty bread and an astringent green salad.

*Time: about 4 hours. Serves 6.*

**Ingredients:**

4 pounds bone-in lamb neck, riblet, or shanks, including bones (see note above)

Kosher salt and black pepper

2 tablespoons olive oil

4 onions, peeled and cut in lengthwise slivers

6 cloves garlic, peeled and crushed

1 bottle dry white wine

5-6 fresh rosemary sprigs

**Directions:**

1. Preheat oven to 300°F. Pat the lamb pieces dry with paper towels and sprinkle with salt and pepper. In a large, heavy enameled or cast-iron Dutch oven with a tight-fitting lid, warm the oil over high heat. When hot, add the lamb pieces in a single layer, working in batches if necessary. Cook until browned, 5 minutes per side, and transfer to a plate. Repeat as needed to brown all the lamb pieces.

2. Discard all but 2 tablespoons fat from pot and reduce heat to medium. Add onions and garlic, season with salt and pepper, and cook, stirring often, until onions are translucent and starting to soften, 10 minutes. Add white wine and rosemary and stir, scraping pot to release browned bits, until bubbling and reduced by about half. Return lamb to pot, nestling pieces in the liquid.

3. Cover pot and place in oven. Bake until lamb meat is very tender, 2 ½ to 3 hours. Using a slotted spoon, transfer lamb and onion pieces to a serving dish and cover loosely to keep warm. Discard rosemary stems. Carefully spoon fat from top of the braising liquid and discard fat, then add braising liquid to serving dish with lamb. Serve hot in shallow bowls.

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