

A woman with long brown hair, wearing a tan felt hat with a feather and a green tweed jacket over a grey turtleneck, leans on a wooden fence. She is smiling at the camera. In the background, there is a green field, a stone wall, and a church with a tall spire under a blue sky.

COVER STORY:
LINCOLNSHIRE
SHEPHERDESS

Where There's a Wool THERE'S A WAY

Lincolnshire's Sophie Arlott has succeeded in creating an amazingly successful smallholding comprising around 300 ewes, marketing her artisan lamb to an appreciative audience of chefs and local families. Her hard work and determination to ensure the best standards of welfare for her animals just goes to show that where there's a wool, there's a way...

Words: Rob Davis. Images: Dean Fisher.

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Love me... love my sheep. It's a reasonable enough basis upon which to conduct family life... and the Arlotts' Sunday lunches are something really quite extraordinary, which helps too. Sophie Arlott has managed to establish her smallholding and turn a fond reminder of her childhood into an artisan farming operation which has succeeded in impressing some of the UK's most famous or well-renowned chefs.

After a busy December lambing half of her flock over the festive season, Sophie Arlott is once again in the thick of it, anticipating the birth of 250 lambs this month.

But where there's a *wool*, there's a way, and happily, the creation of a unique crossbreed specific to Sophie's Lavinton Lamb flock has yielded not only great tasting lamb, but also a flock which can happily exist in harmony with their surroundings.

Sophie has fond memories of a childhood in the countryside, and despite not coming from a farming background - and though

her father was a countryman, but not a smallholder - she decided that upon moving to Lincolnshire that she wanted to raise her own flock.

We counted around 300 ewes before dozing off, but when Sophie woke us up, she explained that one of the reasons her flock has become so well-regarded is the canny way they incorporate the independence of a Hebridean breed with a Border Leicester for hardiness and Southdown for flavour.

“It's taken about three years from creating the female to producing lambs and rearing them to sell as fat lambs, but those three years have been worth it,” says Sophie.

“In that time I've also begun to work with the Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust and we practice conservation grazing whereby the lambs can live on managed reserves nearby.”

“Commercial breeds can be a little too big and soft to live comfortably outdoors. Hebrideans are hardier and like to graze.” >>



>> “They’ll eat invasive species as well as native grasses so it’s a mutually beneficial relationship for us both. The Trust’s land is grazed, the lambs enjoy a natural way of life and the resulting meat is really flavoursome.”

At this time of year the evocative phrase spring lamb comes into common parlance across restaurant menus, farm shops and in supermarkets. In fact, it’s a misnomer that lamb - as opposed to hogget or mutton - is any less enjoyable.

“We tend to refer to lamb as being under a year old, and hogget as being less than 18 months old. Mutton is less than two years old. Lamb has a softer texture, but I would suggest that hogget has more flavour.”

“It’s akin I suppose to rib-eye steaks being more flavoursome but a bit more fatty, and a fillet steak being less flavoursome but more tender. I think hogget is underrated, with faster *lamb* farming cycles more suited to more intensive farming operations.”

“Smaller, more artisanal operations have the ability to keep their animals longer allowing flavour to develop. Artisanal farmers can also hang meat too. I hang my lamb for anywhere from 10 days to two weeks and I think the difference really is noticeable.”

Around 80% of the meat Sophie farms is produced for restaurants, in particular discerning chefs like Lincoln’s Gavin Aitkenhead of Steep Hill’s Jew’s House, Sat Bains in Nottingham or a range of Michelin lauded chefs spread all over the UK, typically supplied as whole carcasses for chefs to butcher themselves.

Happily, though, Sophie always keeps a few animals back to sell directly to consumers seeking not only local livestock with the highest standards of welfare, but also lamb from the same flock as she has historically

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supplied venerated food retailers like Harrods and Fortnum & Mason.

Alongside her insight into breeding the perfect cross, an inclination to allow her flock to graze as the sheep-god intended and all that fresh Lincolnshire air, Sophie also puts the quality of her meat down to the quality of her animal’s diet.

Having acres of pasture around Lavinton - incidentally, that’s the historic name of the village of Lenton in which Sophie is based - Sophie is able to cut her own meadow hay and provide her flock with natural food.

When her ewes need extra - when lambing, for example - Sophie has sourced an excellent feed from The Blankney Estate, right here in the county.

Made up of peas - which are sweet and loaded with protein - plus barley and grass, the feed is free of molasses and soya, enabling Sophie to improve her input and avoid being reliant on non-local feed. ■

Connections to the Land for Sophie...

Sophie was born in Hampshire and studied archaeology and history before working in the media as a researcher on daytime TV programmes.

Moving to Bristol with husband Robert, who works as a commercial pilot, Sophie began working with a team filming wildlife and nature documentaries and lived in Leamington Spa and Paris before moving to the equally glamorous town of Luton.

She and hubby Robert eventually settled in the county in 2008 and with fond memories of a childhood in the country, established her flock. ■



“They do really well on the feed. They’re more energetic healthier, happier looking,” says Sophie.

“My husband Robert helps me out when I ask him to, but generally speaking he’s happy to leave looking after the sheep to me... he knows how very important they are to me!”

Robert is a good deal more keen to enjoy the end result though, as are sons Freddie, aged 17 and Max, 21. The latter is currently studying Spanish and Drama at Bristol University.

When he returns to the family home with a bag of washing, they all enjoy Sunday lunch... roast lamb naturally.

“There’s something about a Sunday lunch which reminds us all of what food should be about,” says Sophie.

“Raising livestock and cooking aren’t just inextricably linked, they also have something in common; slower is better. The longer and

happier an animal’s live and the more we make time for cooking proper food the better. Farmers in the county are doing a great job despite that we’re encouraged to spend less and less time cooking food and enjoying meals together. Food isn’t a ‘problem’ to be ‘solved’ as quickly as possible.”

“Slowing down the raising of livestock and farming in a way that’s less hurried, in synergy with nature instead of trying to rush it, will create better quality food.

Likewise making time for a great Sunday lunch together is a simple pleasure that too few of us make time for these days.”

Foremost in Sophie’s mind is giving her flock a happy healthy life and enabling them to live as nature intended.

In return they reward her with the most flavoursome meat and the chance to enjoy a career in farming that’s ethical, environmentally friendly and a return to traditional farming practices. ■



Find Out More: Sophie Arlott founded Lavinton Lamb in 2008 and raises her Hebridean/Leicester/Southdown cross flock between Grantham, Sleaford and Bourne. Sophie sells her high-welfare meat to restaurants, and directly to the public. For joints of lamb, lamb burgers and sausages direct from the farm gate call 01476 855055 or see www.lavinton.com. ■