



Australian Dorper and White Dorper

Dorpers pass the taste test

focus

Dorpers on the plate

ENTHUSIASTIC commercial breeders Graeme and Nina Howie have set up a true paddock to plate marketing operation that is promoting Dorper sheep to city and country consumers.

They have set up Dorper Lamb as a registered trademark and after 18 months have successfully built a clientele of metropolitan-based chefs, retail butchers, restaurants and home cooks and are developing a supply chain with other producers to expand the business.

Graeme and Nina own a property at Busselton on WA's west coast where they run 700 F1 and F2 Dorper ewes as well as a small flock of unregistered stud sheep from which they breed their own sires.

While the ewe lambs are retained for their upgrading program the wethers, along with Dorper cross lambs from a small group of other commercial Dorper breeders, are custom killed at Dardanup Butchering Company, Bunbury, or Hillside Meats, Narrogin.

The meat is sold as chilled cryovac, cut-up whole carcasses that are attractively boxed and home-delivered.

Graeme said he had succeeded in getting customers to accept whole carcasses by developing a range of recipe suggestions and simple but interesting cuts.

A standard pack consisted of two boned easy-carve legs, two French racks, a full set of loin chops, two packs of forequarter chops, one rolled forequarter, two shanks, four rump mini roasts and 1kg of sausages or mince.

The Howies sell about 100 carcasses per week under the Dorper Lamb label and Graeme said being such a small operation meant they were limited in the amount of specially selected cuts they could offer customers.

"Some chefs wanted just individual cuts but when you are selling nice fresh Dorper lambs it was pretty easy to convince them otherwise," Graeme said.

Graeme and Nina spent

considerable time visiting restaurants, butcher shops and holding food tastings.

In addition they had produced stylish advertising pamphlets, but their business had grown mainly by word of mouth.

The aim was to build demand to about 300 carcasses per week but Graeme said they had no intention of becoming another major processor:

They have a small refrigerated van.

The lamb was distributed alongside labelled Margaret River Wagyu beef and has found its way into some of WA's most exclusive dining establishments including celebrity chef Kate Lamont's restaurants at Yallingup and in the Swan Valley.

One of Dorper Lamb's bigger advocates was David Coomer, head chef at the renowned Star Anise restaurant in Nedlands, WA.

Mr Coomer said the lamb met all the requirements for the restaurant trade.

"The consistency of quality and size, fabulous meat texture and clean, pure taste make Dorper lamb ideal to work with," he said.

"I am still trialling the lamb and seeing what works, but for now I am planning to use the shoulders on my menu."

Acclaimed food critic and author Marg Johnson also sang the praises of Dorpers and the Howies' product.

"I like the way the lamb responds to a wide range of cooking techniques," Ms Johnson said.

"It is also a very clean, green product, and I really think the Dorper will be the lamb product of the future."

Members of the Slow Food group, based around fine cuisine and opposition to fast food chains, were also using Dorper Lamb on their menus.

Among other retail outlets were Fresh Provisions, Bicton, The Boatshed, Cottesloe, and the famed Torre butcher shop in Northbridge, and these all specialised in quality fresh produce at the top end of the market.

Dorper Lamb also had a website, www.dorperlamb.com.au, where customers could place their orders 52 weeks of the year.

Graeme's supply arrangement with other breeders allowed the



Chef David Coomer (left), Star Anise restaurant, Nedlands, food critic and author Marg Johnson, and Dorper Lamb's Graeme Howie, Busselton.



Slow-cooked Dorper lamb shoulder with vegetable puree, cooked by chef David Coomer, Star Anise restaurant, Nedlands.

stock to be delivered to the closest abattoir and payment was based on market value with sometimes a small premium.

He specified lambs in the 18kg-22kg weight range with a two or three fat score but his knowledge of his customers allowed him to make the most of lambs that fell outside the desired specification.

"Some people like their lamb heavily trimmed with no fat at all and others are happy to pay for

an extra big lamb," Graeme said.

Their liaison with other breeders ensured a continuous supply but extra demand in the lead up to Christmas forced him to draw upon a small store of frozen product.

Graeme said he found the challenge of market development enjoyable and rewarding and firmly believed success came from keeping the aims and operation simple.