

the producers.



“Of all domesticated animals, the sheep is, without exception, the most useful to man as food”

BOOK OF HOUSEHOLD MANAGEMENT BY ISABELLA BEETON, 1857

Dressed as mutton



Long dismissed as lamb's poor relation, mutton is enjoying a renaissance, thanks to mouthwatering produce from farmers such as Ben Weatherall. We went to meet him

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The wild hills of south-west Scotland (above) are home to Ben Weatherall's flock of prized Blackface sheep

WHEN EGON RONAY PAID A VISIT TO THE IVY – the London haunt so adored by media luvvies – one dish particularly tickled the legendary restaurant critic's fancy: mutton and turnip pie.

Whether the veteran reviewer knew that the melting morsels of meat he consumed with such fervour had spent five years roaming the heather-clad hills of south-west Scotland is not known. But he's unlikely to have been too surprised to learn that The Ivy's delicious mutton comes from Ben Weatherall, producer of the award-winning Scottish Blackface mutton that's wowing top chefs and foodies alike.

The environment in which Ben Weatherall's sheep thrive could scarcely be further removed from the A-list glamour of The Ivy. The imposing farmhouse Ben shares with artist wife Silvy and their four

the producers.



Ben's farmhouse was acquired thanks to a generous legacy from his grandfather

ABOVE Ben Weatherall takes food editor Angela Boggiano to Over Fingland in search of his skittish Blackface sheep (top right)

"The word about mutton is starting to get around. Smart chefs are already putting it on their menus" HUGH FEARNLEY-WHITTINGSTALL

children looms beacon-like out of the rain-lashed wilderness on the dark, stormy night the **delicious.** team stops by. And when Ben appears on the doorstep – all six-foot-eight of him – he makes a formidable sight. But once inside, the welcome could not be warmer.

The following morning all trace of the storm is gone and a wintry blue washes the skies as we head out to view Ben's flock. When we can get within a mile of them, that is. The semi-wild sheep roam vast territories in family groups known as hefts, and they're a suspicious lot who leg it at the sight of us.

While his sheep are as Scottish as haggis, neeps and tatties, Ben spent his early years in the Home Counties. His love of life north of the border stems from childhood memories of summers spent at his grandparent's home, a few miles up the road from where his sheep now roam.

When his grandfather died in 1989,

Ben used the substantial legacy he was left to buy his current house, which came with 1,500 acres of pasture. But he was still a student at the time, and never imagined he'd one day farm the land himself. "What did I study? Guinness and girls, mostly," he says. "I had no idea what I wanted to do and if anyone had told me I would become a sheep farmer, I'd have said they were mad."

For years the property was let while Ben made his fortune in the fast-paced world of Eurobonds. "I was earning lots of money," he says. "But wherever there's money, there are unattractive characters. Everything was about money, and I began to find the lifestyle shallow."

But Ben needed a catalyst to make him leave the financial markets behind for good – and that came when a close friend died after being hit by a car. "It made me think 'what the hell am I doing, wasting my life on a job I don't even want

to do?' I handed in my notice shortly afterwards," recalls Ben.

Once the decision to change his life was made, moving to Scotland and getting involved in food proved a no-brainer. "People couldn't believe I was walking away from such a lucrative job. But I've always felt I'd end up in Scotland," he says. "And I've always loved food – it has played a huge part in my family life."

The only question was what kind of food business he should get into. First there was an abortive attempt to woo the Japanese with whisky-infused wasabi, then a flirtation with creating a Scottish-themed humbug before Ben finally hit on the more obvious idea of raising livestock and selling produce by mail order. Thus was Weatherall Foods established in 1998. Ben has since acquired a 6,000-acre farm called Over Fingland and turned his company into an award-winning success.

The company also supplies lamb,

Mutton with caper sauce

SERVES 6

READY IN ABOUT 4 HOURS

This timeless mutton recipe is originally French – and will always remain a classic because the ingredients complement each other so beautifully.

1 leg of mutton, about 3kg
3 large onions, quartered
3 carrots, cut into large chunks
1 fresh rosemary sprig
6 black peppercorns

FOR THE CAPER SAUCE

2 tbsp butter
2 tbsp plain flour

4 tbsp capers, drained and rinsed, half of them chopped
Small bunch of fresh mint, finely chopped

1. Put the meat in a large pan and add 1.5 litres water, which should come about three-quarters of the way up the joint. Add the vegetables, rosemary and peppercorns and some seasoning. Bring to the boil, cover, then reduce the heat to a simmer for 3½ hours or until the meat is tender. There should be little resistance when the meat is pierced with a skewer. Skim the fat from the stock and put the meat on a plate,

covered. Strain the stock, discarding the solids. You'll need 600ml.

2. Meanwhile, make the sauce. Melt the butter in a pan, add the flour and cook for 1 minute. Gradually stir in the mutton stock and bring to the boil, stirring. Simmer for 5 minutes, stir in the capers, mint and season.

3. Slice the mutton and serve with the caper sauce and some boiled, minted potatoes.
PER SERVING 674kcal, 34.6g fat (15.6g saturated), 77.7g protein, 13.9g carbs, 7.5g sugar, 1.5g salt
WINE NOTE Spanish reds are often good with lamb, and in this case a young, fruity Rioja is just the trick.





Mutton, vegetable and barley stew

Mutton, vegetable and barley stew

SERVES 4
 TAKES 25 MINUTES TO MAKE AND
 2½ HOURS IN THE OVEN
 This lovely stew is based on the
 traditional Scotch broth ingredients.

- 1kg boned shoulder or leg of mutton, cut into 2cm dice
- 3 tbsp plain flour
- 2 tbsp olive oil
- 15g butter
- 2 celery sticks, roughly sliced
- 1 leek, washed and roughly sliced
- 2 garlic cloves, crushed
- 2 carrots, roughly sliced
- 400g floury potatoes, roughly diced
- 400g swede, roughly diced
- 500ml fresh lamb stock, hot
- 400ml carrot juice
- 2 fresh sprigs each rosemary and thyme, plus extra to garnish
- 100g pearl barley

1. Preheat the oven to 180°C/
 fan160°C/gas 4. Put the cubed
 mutton in a large bowl, add the

- flour and season. Toss well.
 - 2. Put a large casserole over a high heat. Add the oil and brown the mutton in batches.
 - 3. Turn the heat down to medium and add the butter. Stir in the celery, leek, garlic, carrots, potatoes and swede and toss well. Cook, stirring occasionally, until browning a little. Pour in the lamb stock and carrot juice, then add the rosemary and thyme. Bring to the boil, cover and cook in the oven for 2½ hours, until tender.
 - 4. Stir in the pearl barley 30 minutes before the end of the cooking time, so it absorbs the juices and becomes tender. The stew should be thick and juicy. Season, garnish with rosemary and thyme and serve with rustic bread.
- PER SERVING** 754kcal, 33.4g fat (11.7g saturated), 61.6g protein, 63.1g carbs, 16.4g sugar, 1.3g salt
WINE NOTE Crack open a simple Cabernet Sauvignon with this stew.



“Mutton is to lamb what a millionaire uncle is to his poverty-stricken nephew.” DES ESSARTS, FRENCH ACTOR (1740-1793)

game, pork, turkey and beef, but it's the mutton Ben is most proud of – and which required the biggest leap of faith to produce, owing to its unpopularity.

“My mother showed me a 19th century copy of Mrs Beeton’s book that contained 100 mutton recipes. In a recent reissue, there were just three,” he says. “That shows just how unfashionable mutton had become. Yet it’s a sensational meat. It needs slow cooking, but when properly prepared, your knife goes through it like butter, and it has a much stronger, gamier flavour than lamb. I was determined to become part of the drive to get this delicious meat back on the nation’s plates.”

For hundreds of years, mutton was a British staple. But the meat suffered a rapid decline during the Second World War as many sheep farmers went away to war, leaving their flocks less well cared for. As

a result, the mutton became tough and fatty, and lost its fine reputation.

Its fate was sealed over the next 50 years as the popularity of New Zealand lamb soared at mutton’s expense. Before long, the meat that had once graced the tables of kings and poets had all but dropped off the nation’s menu.

Its fortunes changed in 2004 when the Prince of Wales launched the Mutton Renaissance campaign – an initiative to support beleaguered British sheep farmers who were struggling to sell their older animals. Since then, many have benefited – including Ben, whose mutton sales have increased tenfold over the past three years.

He produces two varieties: a two-year-old mutton and the five-year-old mutton, which comes from ewes that have been left to run on the hills, and is ideal for slow cooking.

The results of Ben’s efforts have

been little short of spectacular. He was awarded a Gold in the Sainsbury’s Taste of Britain awards 2005 and a host of top chefs have lined up to use his produce. Ben puts his success down to his sheep’s heather diet, which sweetens the flavour of the meat, and their stress-free existence.

Yes, it’s the good life for the sheep – and for Ben and his family, too. “Deciding to change my life so drastically was very scary at first – I went from a big salary to zero salary,” says Ben. “But I don’t have a single regret. We’re now in profit so all the hard work we’ve put in is starting to pay off. And you can’t put a price on feeling enthusiastic about what you do.”

Or eat for that matter – as Egon Ronay would no doubt agree. **d.** To order Ben Weatherall’s produce, call 01387 730326 or visit www.blackface.co.uk

ABOVE Ben talks Angela through the finer points of raising Blackface sheep. The quest to breed the perfect Blackface is a competitive business and some farmers have been known to blacken the faces of their sheep with shoe polish to increase their appeal to the judges in local shows