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Features

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Local Farm Profile: Top Market Rabbitry

If you had asked Leslie Zinger a decade ago what kind of farming she thought she would end up in, she likely would not have said rabbit farming. In the summer of 2004 Leslie and her husband Jeff purchased the family farm on Splint Road in Ariss. They began to research many different types of farming including crops, cattle, pigs, chickens, horses, sheep, goats, and yes—rabbit! What they quickly determined was that there was growing consumer interest in this specialty meat and raising rabbit was a way that they could keep their family farm viable. Leslie and Jeff, along with their two young children, are the fourth generation to farm their land, but the first to focus on rabbit farming. They also sell ducks, geese, turkey, chicken and quail eggs and have recently added a few Heritage variety Tamworth pigs to their operation.

Leslie officially started Top Market Rabbitry in 2006 and this interest has blossomed into a family passion. In the early years they produced a modest 200-300 meat rabbits. This year production has skyrocketed to 3,000 meat rabbits, each yielding 3-4 pounds dressed. Top Market offer rabbit meat in a variety of forms including whole, sausage, ground, stewing and specialized cuts. All the meat from their farm is government inspected, vacuum sealed and weighed. It is sold farmgate and most recently at the Aberfoyle Farmers' Market. Top Market Rabbitry products are also finding their way into high end restaurants and being featured in events in the Region.

Leslie admits that while many consumers recognize the many benefits of rabbit meat, such as health, sustainability and environmental impact, others continue to carry a cultural bias against consuming rabbit. This is where a little education goes a long way. She stresses that her rabbits are bred for the dinner plate rather than as pets. She raises California and New Zealand White varieties and has continually brought in special blood lines to create the best meat breed. "Today's rabbit no longer has a "wild" taste that requires extra tenderizing or strong flavoured marinades", notes Leslie. In fact most liken rabbit to a mild, sweet tasting chicken.

One of the key priorities at Top Market Rabbitry is food safety and ethical treatment of animals. They adhere to a



Leslie Zinger at her farm in Ariss



The New Zealand White Rabbit is a popular meat breed



'Runner Ducks' are a recent addition to the farm operation

rigorous regime of cleaning, disinfecting and health assessments. They've built a special 40'x 60' insulated and ventilated barn with windows to let in natural light. At any given time there are generally 500-700 rabbits in the barn.

The rabbits are housed in large stainless steel cages which are cleaned regularly and fed a healthy diet of custom-



Local Farm Profile continued

formulated pellets from a local feed mill. Leslie jokes that their steady supply of water is cleaner than what most people drink because it goes through four filters and UV light. With approximately 150 does and 20 bucks, record- keeping for breeding schedules is also of paramount importance. Renowned for being prolific producers, the does are capable of yielding 40 plus fryer rabbits a year, with a growing period of 8-10 weeks.

Another focal point for Leslie is educating the public on the various ways to prepare and enjoy rabbit. She suggests starting out with a taste of rabbit sausage, one of their biggest sellers. "I also recommend trying a stew or slow cooker recipe". See page 4 for "Crock Pot Rabbit Stew". Leslie's favourite recipes include smoked rabbit meat on melted brie with chut-

ney, wraps, kabobs or stuffed saddle of rabbit which is gourmet but easy to prepare. Check out more great recipes on www.ontariorabbit.ca and on the foodlink.ca website where you will find the delectable 'Rabbit Confit' appetizer that was featured at this year's Taste Local event.

In addition to selling her products farmgate and at the Aberfoyle Market seasonally, Leslie also sells her products through Market Fresh in Guelph as well as to various restaurants in the region such as Envers in Morriston and Artisanale in Guelph where rabbit has been a popular specialty of the house for the past three years!

Top Market Rabbitry has been listed on Foodlink's Buy Local! Buy Fresh! map for the past two years but just this past fall they participated for the first time in Foodlink's Taste Local! Taste Fresh! culinary showcase in St. Jacobs. Judging from their huge success, it appears that the public is ready to expand their palettes. Top Market Rabbitry was paired up with Puddicombe House of New Hamburg. Chef Lance Edwards worked his culinary magic and came up with a creation that was the single biggest hit of the day.

"This beautifully displayed appetizer featured pulled rabbit placed on a slice of crusty bread and served with crab apple barbeque sauce, red onion marmalade and a crisp slaw. The combination of sweet and savoury was perfect; the dish was a pleasant surprise to food lovers who were trying rabbit for the first time", says Taste Local participant Taryn Graham. Leslie concurs that it was a great way for people to sample rabbit and have it prepared for them. Guests were delighted to learn that in addition to being delicious, rabbit is also very nutritious and even leaner than chicken.

While Leslie may never have guessed a decade ago that she would end up a rabbit farmer, she certainly has no regrets. She loves the fact that that every



The Rabbits are housed in stainless steel cages in a spacious, insulated barn with natural light



A road sign on Hwy 86

day is different and that she is able to enjoy plenty of time outdoors while being a stay-at-home mom. She was wise to recognize that the growing demand for rabbit meat and gradual public acceptance represented a great opportunity for her family to fill a local food niche. She can no doubt be proud of being a pioneer in this field.

Top Market Rabbitry is located at 5887 Splint Road, Ariss. They are open yearround. Please call ahead for hours or to place an order 519-716-9464.



Chef Lance Edwards & Leslie Zinger at Foodlink's 2011 Taste Local Event | Photo by Sara Geidlinger



Finding Rabbit Meat in Waterloo Region

There are a few local farm markets in Waterloo Region that offer rabbit meat. If you are up for an adventure, consult Foodlink's 2011 Buy Local! Buy Fresh! map for a listing. Please call for hours and availability.



Oakridge Acres

2132 Greenfield Rd. R.R.#1, Ayr 519-632-7653 www.oakridgeacres.ca



1235 Martin Creek Road, St. Jacobs 519-664-1337



Mosborough Country Market 5284 Wellington Rd 32, Guelph 519-763-5224 www.mosboroughmarket.ca



Charles Quality Meats

1448 Wilby Road, St. Agatha * Also at Kitchener and St. Jacobs Farmers' Market 519-886-7931



Top Market Rabbitry 5887 Splint Road, Ariss 519-716-9464 www.topmarketrabbitry.ca



Relishing Rabbit

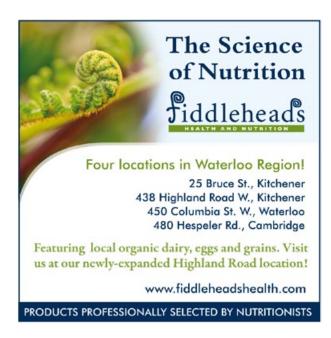
It is no surprise that we North Americans have been slow to accept rabbit meat into our diets. After all, bunnies are cute, cuddly and docile. Furthermore, many of us have rabbits as domestic pets, so how could we possibly eat them? However, in numerous other parts of the world, most notably Europe, rabbit meat has been a dietary mainstay for centuries. France is currently the world's largest producer and consumer of rabbit meat. Meanwhile Hungary has rabbitries with over 10,000 does producing rabbits for export to Italy!

While many Canadians continue to show some hesitation with regard to eating rabbit, times are definitely changing and increasingly, savvy consumers are seeking it out. There are so many reasons why eating local, ethically-raised rabbit meat makes sense. It is economical, easy on the environment, nutritious and flavourful.

Why Rabbit is a Good Choice?

In addition to being extremely healthy, rabbit is one of the most environmentally friendly meats you can eat. Rabbits are a sustainable meat choice because they consume a forage diet. They do not tax the land they are raised on and don't compete with humans for food calories. Rabbits are prolific and have a much smaller carbon footprint than other animals because they convert calories into pounds more efficiently. Rabbits can produce six pounds of meat on the same amount of feed and water it takes a cow to produce just one pound!

This meat source makes especially good sense in third world countries where a buck and doe can easily feed a family for years. Rabbits, unlike chickens, quickly replenish their own stock, a stock that with each generation is better suited for its particular environment. As the world's human population grows, leaving less land to raise food, rabbit will play an increasingly important role in this supply.





The Health Benefits of Rabbit Meat

Rabbit meat is lower in fat and higher in protein than chicken, turkey, lamb, pork or beef. It is also low in cholesterol yet high in Omega 3s, while supplying 100% of the RDA for B12. Because rabbits are raised up off the ground, their meat is one of the "cleanest". Furthermore, rabbits do not need preventative medications to stay healthy, whereas many other animals are regularly pumped with antibiotics. Domestic meat rabbits are generally fed a nutritionally balanced pelleted diet made of alfalfa and other grains, free from hormones, antibiotics and other animal byproducts.

Uses of Rabbit...sage advice!

Rabbit is an extremely versatile all-white meat that absorbs spices and flavouring well. It has been described as a milder, sweeter version of chicken and can be used in a huge variety of dishes. Sage, fennel, rosemary, juniper, mustard and white wine



Rabbit is all white meat and has a high proportion of meat to bones

all pair well with the meat. The most common types of rabbit bred for meat is the New Zealand White and California rabbit.

Rabbit pelts are sometimes used for clothing and accessories, such as scarves or hats. Angora rabbits are bred for their long, fine hair which is



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sheered and harvested like sheep wool. Rabbit manure makes excellent compost because it is rich in organic matter and nutrients. Even rabbit milk may also be of great medicinal or nutritional benefit due to its high protein content.

The History of Rabbit

The wild rabbit *Oryctolagus cuniculus* of southern Europe and North Africa is thought to have been discovered by Phoenicians when they reached the shores of Spain about 1000 BC. In Roman times the rabbit was still emblematic of Spain. The Romans are believed to have spread rabbits throughout the Empire as a game animal.

Rabbits are small mammals in the *Leporidae* family. Domestication of rabbits can be traced back to the Middle Ages. French Monks in the Champagne region kept them in *leporaria*, stone-walled pens, so that they could have access to a more delectable dish than the tougher wild rabbit.

In North America rabbit production was originally geared to supply felt hat manufacturers, and the rabbit meat was secondary. Demand for rabbit meat rose during World War II, but then dropped again due to the rising price of feed and the closing of several meat processors.

Today rabbit meat as food is undergoing a renaissance and it is no longer associated with tough times. Consumers have come to see it as an ethical, sustainable, delicious food choice. Increasingly, this specialty meat is being featured at farm gates, local retailers and at fine dining establishments. If you do eat meat, perhaps it is time to expand your palette and give rabbit a try. •

DID YOU KNOW?

The estimated average annual consumption of rabbit meat per person in Canada is about 50 gm compared with 5 kg in Europe!



Rabbit Crock Pot Stew

For melt in your mouth, fall apart tender meat – crock pot style or in the oven casserole cast iron...pure comfort food.



What you will need:

4-7 lbs / 2-3 kg of rabbit meat or 6-8 serving pieces

1 teaspoon salt and ground black pepper

1 28 oz (796 mL) can of whole tomatoes

1 cup white wine

1 cup chicken stock or water

20 cremini mushrooms, sliced

125 g shortcut bacon, sliced

2 carrots, chopped

2 onions, chopped

2 stalks celery, chopped

1 bay leaf

1/2 teaspoon thyme

1/2 teaspoon oregano

1/2 teaspoon red pepper flakes

1/4 cup flour

Method:

Combine all other ingredients EXCEPT FLOUR in a large bowl, mix well and pour over the rabbit. Cover and cook on low for 6-8 hours.

Thirty minutes before ready blend flour with 1/2 cup of water until it is a smooth paste, add to the pot and stir well to thicken and continue cooking. Allow to rest 10-15 minutes before serving.

At this point the rabbit should be so tender that you can tear pieces off with a fork to serve rather than cut. Just scoop it all out onto a plate.

This recipe and the Rabbit Confit featured at Taste Local event are listed at: www.foodlink.ca under the "Learn about Local Food" section.