

WELCOME GUESTS TO THE TABLE



# RACK *it* UP

*By Karen Weisberg*

WITH RACK OF LAMB.





**m**ore than 30% of lamb entrees on fine-dining menus are racks, according to a recent Chicago-based Datassential menu trends study. That's likely to continue as long as chefs enjoy offering rack of lamb with a signature twist, such as a gingerbread crust or a pomegranate glaze.

"Lamb rack is being updated and paired with more interesting flavor combinations beyond mint jelly, from mango/mint chutney to cucumber/mint raita," says Megan Wortman, executive director of the Denver-based American Lamb Board. And, she sees sauces such as harissa and chimichurri coming into play as world flavor influences impact lamb racks.

### PREP 101

Bruce Mattel, senior associate dean of culinary arts at The Culinary Institute of America (CIA), Hyde Park, New York, buys into the popular notion that anyone can make a rack of lamb taste good, because it's such a tender cut. He suggests it can be kept whole, cut into rib chops, or pushed and pulled into a crown roast.

"You can prepare a crown roast from two racks of lamb from the rib section tied into a crown, trimmed and roasted," Mattel says. To prepare, he scores each rack slightly in between the bones in the back. Then he pulls, shapes and ties them together end to end to create a circle. After roasting, the crown's center can be filled with a jardinière of asparagus, peas, carrots and green beans.

With today's emphasis on nose-to-tail charcuterie, more chefs have become versed in fabrication. "The rack is a primal cut of lamb with two sides," Mattel says. "If you're buying whole, there's a center bone, so there are various ways to fabricate it. The most common way is frenched rack of lamb with two separate sides of the rack."

The chine bones and feather bones are removed, leaving the ribs intact and extending about two inches beyond the eye of lamb. "Most chefs will clean those bones really well, so whether served as double chops, single chops or carved tableside, it remains a dramatic presentation," Mattel says.

Occasionally, rack of lamb is on the menu at The Bocuse Restaurant at the CIA's Hyde Park campus. In this classic preparation, the seared racks are coated with Dijon mustard and a seasoned breadcrumb/parsley mixture, then topped with persillade at service.

### SIGNATURE DISH

Steven Topple thinks Colorado lamb is among the best in the world. "It has more flavor to it—and rack of lamb is always on the menu here," says the executive chef at Game Creek Club and Restaurant, Vail, Colorado. The portion is typically a half rack of four bones. Topple cuts an eight-bone rack in half, then trims off two chops for his signature gingerbread-crust Colorado rack of lamb with sweet potato gratin, braised red cabbage, thyme and red wine sauce.

Since its creation, the recipe has followed Topple to various restaurants in Vail. "It happened that there were some gingerbread sponge cake crumbs on the kitchen counter, and I put some on the lamb," he says. "Now, we have developed the dish to what it is today."

To prepare, he sears the lamb in oil, brushes it with maple syrup, sprinkles it with gingerbread crust and finishes it in the oven. "The aroma in the kitchen while it's cooking is outstanding," he says.

If Game Creek Club and Restaurant was open year-round (it's closed spring and fall), Topple says he would gladly menu lamb through the four seasons. And he always tells guests where product is from, such as the lamb from Mountain States Rosen Company, Greeley, Colorado. He notes "Colorado lamb" on the menu, and waitstaff go over the menu with guests.

Steven Topple's gingerbread-crust rack of Colorado lamb.

PHOTO CREDIT Charles Townsend/BesentVail Daily

## MEAT MATTERS rack it up



Topple recognizes the importance of cleaning, or frenching, the bones to remove any silver skin or fat. He does the same with the occasionally menued rack of elk. “Elk is a dark-red meat, whereas lamb is a lighter pink,” he says. “Either way, I like to let the meat rest 5-10 minutes out of the oven. I like my lamb medium-rare to medium. The flavor profile changes—there’s a tenderness difference—when you let the meat rest before serving.”

### IT'S SIMPLE

By the time Mark DeNittis graduated from Johnson & Wales University in 1992, he was already a fan of lamb in general and the rack in particular. Now a product specialist with Sysco, Denver, he recalls a trip to Calabria, Italy, in 1983 when lamb was prepared over a wood fire and served with a simple marinade. “One of my favorite preparations is a quick marinade—perhaps garlic, crushed pepper, lemon and rosemary—applied the night before or even that morning,” he says.

In his role with Sysco, primarily serving hotels, restaurants and institutions in Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska and Wyoming, DeNittis finds that most prefer a 2½- to 3½-pound rack. “Some of them prefer frenched coming into their locations, while others specify un-frenched if they have an outlet for the trim,” he says. “Operators that have staff with the skill to do so—plus the time—would order un-frenched. However, with significant volume, they might choose to save labor for other efforts.”

DeNittis, who is also founder of The Rocky Mountain Institute of Meat, Denver, suggests that rack of lamb and rib chops make great appetizer and entree applications. For his American Lamb Rib Chops Scottadita, he combines olive oil, garlic, wine, lemon juice, mint, rosemary, parsley, lemon zest, red pepper, salt and pepper. He pours a thin layer of half the mixture into a nonreactive container, adds the chops, then adds the rest of the mixture. It’s refrigerated for at least an hour and removed 30 minutes before cooking. The chops are grilled over high heat to rare or medium-rare. “The natural marbling found in American lamb lends it to being prepared below medium,” he says.

He notes that the rack/rib-eye loin muscle is considered a nonworking muscle, and a dry heat cooking application, such as grilling or roasting, works best. A leg or shank requires different preparation techniques, temperatures and ingredients.

### LOCAL SOURCING

As a student, Memphis, Tennessee-born Jeff Lewis discovered that lamb was a protein he could afford, so he often chowed down on lamb burgers and other ground lamb dishes. Then he got to prepare and sample racks, lamb tenderloin and other cuts at culinary school, and became a true fan.

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LEFT: Jay Veregge's rack of lamb with roasted rosemary, warm yam salad and bacon-braised greens at Ten22.

RIGHT: Jeff Lewis notes local sources, including the lamb in his herb-roasted lamb rack, on the menu.

OPPOSITE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Raw rack chops; and a lamb crown roast with oven-roasted vegetables

Today, Lewis is executive chef at Georgia Sea Grill in St. Simons Island, Georgia, and continues to incorporate local and sustainable product into his dishes, having learned to respect their culinary value. With lamb a staple throughout the year, he often menus it as herb-roasted rack of lamb with mint/mustard sauce, cipollini onions, kale and grilled polenta. During colder months, it might be plated with kale, risotto and butternut squash puree.

Purchasing locally is of prime importance, and Lewis purchases lamb from Hunter Cattle Co., Brooklet, Georgia, about an hour north of the restaurant. “We definitely note the local sources on the menu. It’s a good way to let people know we’re sticking to our word,” he says.

To stay current and continually put a new twist on old creations, Lewis has become an avid user of Instagram. “You can learn so much if you follow the good chefs—some I worked for plus others I stumble upon,” he says. But when it comes to the basics of rack of lamb preparation, he advises sticking to tradition. “Make sure it’s cut right. We cut it and french it, cleaning excess meat and fat off. We cut it into racks of two pieces. The bone can make it look bigger, and with the bone in, it cooks differently, so make sure you have the temperature that you want. Make sure it’s done to medium-rare.”

## PERFECT FIT

For Jay Veregge, director of culinary operations for Harvego Restaurant Group—The Firehouse Restaurant, Ten22 and District—Sacramento, California, sourcing lamb from Superior Farms, Dixon, California, serves him well. “The farm is within 30 miles of the restaurants, and the lamb is perfect in flavor—not too lean, not too fatty. For me, as a sourcing chef, it wouldn’t make sense not to have it, because it provides diversity to the menu,” he says.

He says he can’t think of one culture, one product, one application where lamb doesn’t fit, therefore, it’s no surprise that he finds steady and consistent demand at Ten22 for his rack of lamb with roasted rosemary, warm yam salad and bacon-braised greens. “The age of the consumer is not a factor, thanks to the Food Network, which instills the desire and provides encouragement to viewers to ‘try that,’ to wrap their minds around it. And that has helped us a lot.”

Veregge offers to fix lamb for diners who say they don’t like it. “Then I explain that it’s a ruminant and will only eat grass and grain, so it’s quite mild and flavorful.”

Finally, no matter how you prepare the rack, do not overcook it, Veregge says. “The meat is lean, so cook to medium-rare. You can sear and roast it, or sous vide, or chop the rack into chops and then grill or pan-saute. But most important is to cook it to medium-rare, then let it rest before service.” ■

NEW YORK-BASED AWARD-WINNING JOURNALIST KAREN WEISBERG HAS COVERED THE ISSUES AND LUMINARIES OF THE FOOD-AND-BEVERAGE WORLD—BOTH COMMERCIAL AND NONCOMMERCIAL—FOR MORE THAN 25 YEARS.



## AMERICAN LAMB RIB CHOPS SCOTTADITA WITH GRILLED RADICCHIO AND ENDIVE

Mark DeNittis // Product Specialist,  
Sysco, Denver // Founder, The Rocky  
Mountain Institute of Meat, Denver

YIELD: 12 SERVINGS

1½ cups extra virgin olive oil  
30 garlic cloves, crushed  
½ cup white wine  
¼ cup lemon juice  
½ cup mint leaves  
¼ cup rosemary sprigs  
¼ cup Italian parsley leaves  
¼ cup lemon zest  
½ t. crushed red pepper flakes  
Salt and pepper, to taste  
12 American lamb rib  
chops, frenched  
3 heads radicchio, quartered  
6 heads Belgian endive,  
halved lengthwise  
Lemon juice, as needed  
Grated lemon peel, as needed  
Extra virgin olive oil, as needed  
Mint, as needed for garnish

1) In blender or food processor, combine olive oil, garlic, white wine, lemon juice, mint, rosemary, parsley, lemon zest, red pepper, salt and pepper. Blend to a smooth consistency. Reserve ½ cup for service. Pour thin layer of remaining mixture into nonreactive container. Add rib chops; pour rest of mixture over chops. Refrigerate for at least 1 hour.

2) 30 minutes before cooking, remove lamb chops from refrigerator. Grill over high heat until rare or medium-rare. Briefly grill radicchio and endive.

3) For each serving, plate 1 rib chop with 1 wedge radicchio and ½ head Belgian endive. Squeeze lemon juice over radicchio and endive; sprinkle lightly with grated lemon peel, salt, pepper and extra virgin olive oil. Use ½ cup reserved marinade as plate sauce. Garnish with mint.