The Rhönsheep is back
The Rhön in sheep’s clothing

It has got a white coat, white tail legs and a slimmer black head without horns. It belongs to the Rhön like the landscape views and the stony mountains: the Rhön-sheep.

It is hard to believe but at the beginning of the 20th century there were more sheep grazing in the pastures of the Rhön than horses, cattle, pigs, and goats altogether. The meat of the Rhön-sheep was supposed to be delicious and therefore known even beyond the Rhön. Its special taste was appreciated by the members of the court of Paris as well as by the guests of the noble restaurants of London. The Rhön-sheep has gone through an eventful history since then. It disappeared from the Rhön and nearly died out 40 years ago. The stock of the Rhön-sheep has been extended enormously in the previous years. Meanwhile there can be found more than 3,000 ewes in the Rhön.

A fabulous comeback

Since 1985 the “Bund Naturschutz” and the Bavarian regional group of the BUND (Foundation for Conservation, Germany) have been looking for the conservation of the Rhön-sheep.

Ecologists have bought 33 ha (about 82 acres) of the valuable narrow meadows on the southern slope of the Rhön and put 39 Rhön-sheep grazing in these pastures, conserving this part of the landscape at the same time. A modern species-preserving sheep-fold and afterwards a barn were built in 1988. With the help of many private donations and public funds as well as money of the “Adolf and Hildegard Isler Foundation” of the Bavarian ecologists 0.1 million DM had been collected and were then invested in this project. The flock of sheep looked after by Josef Kolb developed into one of the most successful breeding flock of its species. There are over 400 sheep registered in this sheep-farm. Another Rhön-sheep-breeding co-operative in Obereisbach-Ginolfs counts 1,000 ewes. Two sheep-folds have been built and a direct purchase has been organized. Those Rhön-sheep have become essential for the care of the eastern slope of the "Lange Rhön" by now.

Hard times for the Rhön-sheep

The whole breeding of sheep has decreased severely in the last 120 years not only because of the increase in cattle breeding and the introduction of synthetic fertilisers but also because of the decrease of prices for lambwool and for mutton.

It was difficult to purchase the meat of the Rhön-sheep at times when quantity had been more important than quality. The outcome of meat delivered by Rhön-sheep was 30 per cent lower than by conventional sheepbreeding. In 1957 this negative development had reached the lowest point. There remained just 300 Rhön-sheep throughout the whole Federal Republic of Germany. Only due to the idealistic enthusiasm of some people has this woolly fellow been saved from extinction.

A tough constitution, tender meat and of great value for the ecological system

Nowadays we are pleased with the great demand for the delicious meat in many places of the Rhön. In addition to that, the Rhön-sheep plays an important role in the conservation of the agricultural landscape with its rarely occurring animals and plants. The Rhön-sheep with its highly resistant constitution is very well adapted to the rough climate of the Rhön. As they can live on very little, the mountain pastures and the infertile grassland offer ideal living conditions for the Rhön-sheep. At the same time these habits support the conservation of the landscape and there is no need for expensive measures of conservation. We find rare plants in the pastures of the Rhön like the pasque-flower, the carline thistle, the meadow cowslip, the aquilegia, the globe flower, and the gentian (Fransenenzian). Many rare species of butterflies like the Camberwell Beauty, Strienfläuling, and Scheckenfläuler as well as some species of birds threatened with extinction like the Whitethroat, the Red-backed shrike and the Meadow pipit can also be found in these pastures of the Rhön.

The Rhön-sheep: A black head and a white coat.

Shepherd Dietmar Weckbach

The BUND also supported the conservation of the Rhön-sheep in Hesse actively by buying a flock of 250 sheep which were registered in the North of Hesse in 1997 with the help of the Foundation for Conservation in Hesse and the Mineralbrunnen Förstina Enterprise. When the owner of this flock of sheep died, there was the danger that these animals would be sold to the slaughterhouse sooner or later. The BUND Hesse financed the purchase of this flock of sheep without further ado, and they induced the shepherd Dietmar Weckbach from Ehrenberg-Wüstensachsen to take charge of this flock of sheep.

Dietmar Weckbach has been responsible for this flock since then, and he has been able to extend its size to 500 maternal sheep till today.
Although the number of Rhön sheep decreased after 1990, nowadays many flocks of the Rhön sheep have been put grazing in the pastures of the Thuringian Rhön to support the conservation of the infertile grassland there. At the moment there are 20 sheep-breeders with over 1,300 ewes in the Thuringian Rhön.

The flock of the Rhön sheep of the agricultural farms in Kaltensundheim is a treat for the eyes. Hipp Enterprises is exclusively using the meat of the organically raised Rhön sheep to produce its baby food.

There are also many hobby sheep-breeders in the Rhön who have devoted themselves to the conservation of the Rhön sheep.

The shepherds of the Rhön are only able to survive by the purchasing of the meat of the Rhön sheep. And you can help them.
It is very easy: Just tuck into the delicious meat. Enjoy the great variety of meals and try your hand at cooking some of the lovely recipes. Good luck!

Pay attention to the original!

Meanwhile terms like “Rhöner Schaf”, “Rhöner Lamm”, “Rhön Lamm”, or “Lammfleisch” are to be found on the menus of many restaurants. Do not get confused with that: only the term “Rhön schaf” stands for the original.

Original Rhön sheep:
Meat that tastes fantastic!

As mentioned before, the delicious taste of the meat of the Rhön sheep had already been popular to the nobility of Europe centuries ago.

Since the Rhön has been honoured as a certified nature reserve by the UNESCO, many restaurants offer several dishes made of the meat of the Rhön sheep. The shepherds work together with the local butchers, so the sheep can be slaughtered without stress. For that reason the place of origin, the processing, and the trading of the Rhön sheep can be reconstructed at any time. A fact that costumers appreciate in times of meat and food scandals.

People are able to buy meat, salami and sausages and even braa of the Rhön sheep from local traders and retail shops. These just mentioned products are not just delicious food, but they help to conserve the Rhön as a habitat for animals and plants. The meat of the Rhön sheep does not only taste fantastic, but the breeding of the sheep conserves the landscape.

Rhön sheep co-operators

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A recipe...

"Rhöner lamb sweet and sour served in a hot pan"
The "Rhöner Lammfleischstielgen" is not a traditional
dish like roast of lamb, lamb chop or loin. This recipe is
a good example for the fact that excellent meals can-
ot only be made of the high-grade pieces of the lamb
but also of other pieces of the Rhõesheep. To be preci-
ses, it is a lovely and tasty recipe.

Ingredients:
600 g meat of the shoulder, cut in dices of 2 cm
150 g onion, chopped
1 tbspn tomato purée
50 g wholewheat flour
150 g strips of root vegetables (e.g. carrots, celery, leek)
2 apples chopped
Cooking fat, salt, pepper, rosemary, thyme, honey,
cider for seasoning.

Ingredients for cider-honey marinade
1 l cider (self-made)
120 g honey
2 tbspns apple vinegar
1 tspn salt
1 fresh branch or one tspn of thyme leaves

Preparation:
Put all ingredients for the marinade in a pot and heat it
until it is boiling. Let it cool down and add the meat to
the marinade and after 1 to 3 days it will be soaked
well. Separate the marinade from the meat with a
slice, heat the fat and fry the meat and the diced
onions. Add some of the marinade and the tomato
purée and brown it lightly and add the flour. Now fill in
the rest of the marinade. Cook it until it is done. For
further information:

For further information:

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