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Food & Drink

Amazing Graze

The bleating best lamb in Canada has diners flocking to St. John's, Newfoundland.

BY SARAH MUSGRAVE



It sounded like the punchline to a joke. “This lamb is incredible. Where do you get it?” I inquired one evening at an upscale [St. John's](#) restaurant. The waiter’s eyes twinkled. “From Sheep Island, of course.”

Sheep are almost as old as the hills on The Rock; they’ve been raised here for some 500 years. Resilient, low-maintenance and able to survive on scrubland unsuited to cattle, they were favoured by early seafarers and settlers. The province even claims its own indigenous breed, which traces its lineage back to the U.K.’s Cheviots and, possibly, the Icelandic landrace – Vikings among sheep. But finding local lamb showcased on a menu reflects a new pride in the sometimes-surprising regional bounty. And Newfoundland’s saltwater lamb, as it’s casually called here, is one of its top culinary secrets.

With lambs pastured on high-protein grasses washed by salty waves and ocean air – they’ll eat seaweed too, traipsing along with ribbons in their mouths – the meat is distinctive, finely textured and faintly herbaceous. For chef Jeremy Charles of [Raymonds](#) (named *enRoute*’s Canada’s Best New Restaurant in 2011), it’s comparable to France’s exquisitely tender agneau de pré-salé, famously raised on coastal salt meadows. When you consider that the province has an estimated number of sheep in the thousands – New Zealand has almost 32 million – it’s easy to understand why, at least for now, you have to visit for a taste.



Raymonds sous chef, Peter Burt; sommelier, Jeremy Bonia; and chef, Jeremy Charles, looking a little sheepish in front of the camera on Ship Island.

The crew from Raymonds is milling around on a dock on the southern Avalon Peninsula with the Morrays, the father-and-son team that supply the restaurant with lamb. Each spring, after overwintering on the farm, their flocks get their sea legs, making the journey to two offshore grazing grounds used for generations: Ship Island (as it's officially known), where we're headed, and historic Isle aux Bois. If it's fitting that in Newfoundland you take a boat to catch your meat, there are reasons for it. As Howard Morry Jr. explains, raising sheep on remote, windswept islands takes predators out of the picture. And breeders noticed early on that "Sheep" Island products were remarkable; the wool was different and so was the meat.

Before we embark, there is some pointing at my footwear, and I'm shamed into borrowing a pair of Hunter boots several sizes too big for me. I grab a spot next to Howard Morry Sr., who, at nearly 80, is an imposing old-timer. Stories about him are legion: how the Morry sheep would arrive in St. John's by horse and buggy; how he could hold one in each hand, saying, "C'mon now, b'ys, hurry it up," as other men staggered under the weight of a single animal; how he nearly crushed a man's ribs by hugging him for saving a marooned ewe on a winter's eve. He fixes me with water-blue eyes and regales me with tales of shipwrecks, unconcerned about my whitening knuckles.



Pausing mid-munch at Howard Morry's farm, one member of the flock fixes us with a look that says, "Isle be baaaaack."

After transferring to a skiff, we disembark onto slippery rocks at the base of a dramatic incline. Entering a landscape you'd usually only see from afar is a particular feeling, like being a little figure brushstroked into an oil painting. It's clear that few humans have ever set foot here; there's a sense of titillation and transgression, underscored by a whole lot of turds. Howard Jr. is striding up the steep bank effortlessly, followed by the rest of the team. I'm scrabbling along on all fours, my ill-fitting galoshes mired in the mud (or what I hope is mud).

Taking in the view atop the rise, I'm breathless for a different reason. You couldn't make up a scene more mystical unless your name happened to start with "J.R.R." and end with "Tolkien." The morning mist, wisping through a break

in the craggy rock, hovers momentarily. If the weather in St. John's can change on a dime – one reason it's a hot topic of conversation – here it changes on a farthing. A warm breeze comes up, and it's all honeyed light from between the clouds, every stalk of grass cast starkly against its sudden shadow. The sheep choose this moment to stream down from a hillock and across the valley, following the curve of the landscape, the sun a creamy glow on their backs. They gather to drink at one of the natural freshwater pools. They nuzzle. They downright frolic. For folks who care about such things, as I do, it's the epitome of ethically raised livestock.

Howard Jr. calls out to his flock. It sounds like an incantation, but when I ask what the magic words are, he smiles. "Well, I suppose I say something like 'Heresheep, heresheep, here-sheep.'" Strike two for me. What is magic: his flock bellowing back on cue, with recognition, while his father's herd merely gives a few breathy exhales. Bah, it's just the kid.

At one time, scenes like this were common, back in the day when there were shared pastures in rural communities, a facet of subsistence living in a place without too much large-scale agriculture. "Traditionally, everyone had a few sheep for meat, but they don't know the taste of lamb," Howard Jr. tells me. "It was always mutton, and people still associate it with hard times." That's something that's changing – and fast – at least in St. John's, where the recent economic upturn has young chefs (some of whom, like Jeremy Charles, have returned home after long stints abroad) rediscovering traditional resources following the cod moratorium. Much like lobster was once considered a poor man's food, local lamb was previously overlooked as a gourmet delight. These days, sheep farmers like the Morrays can't keep up with demand.



Have you herd? These animals are sheep-wrecked on the island every summer, where they nibble grass and seaweed to their hearts' content.

Waiting for the boat to pick us up, we find a spot on the rocks and drink wine (love that travel corkscrew). The sheep gather watchfully. A puffin flies past, wagging its wings. A seal bobs up, glancing at my clownish boots. Jeremy Charles is negotiating with Howard Jr. "I'll take more shank bones, nothing like it for stock," he's saying. "Underutilized," Howard Jr. nods approvingly. "And blood," Charles adds, mentioning plans for boudin. Howard Jr.'s eyebrows, normally set in Clark Kent mode, rise. "Definitely underutilized," he says, impressed.

As we thump over the cresting waves on our way back, I ask Howard Jr. how the sheep feel about travelling by sea. "You know, I think they look forward to going back to the island each year," he muses. "They jump on the boat, ready to start their summer holidays."

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