

Jack Knox: Slaughterhouse benefit is a meaty issue on Saltspring

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Photograph by: Staff, timescolonist.com

We've seen a lot of fundraisers for a lot of causes over the years -- but a slaughterhouse?

Yes, well, if that's what it takes to keep Saltspring Island's lambs gambolling their way to the mint sauce.

Which is why an internationally known island inn is recruiting rock star chefs to help save Saltspring farmers from the predation of the provincial government.

Got all that?

Lamb has long been synonymous with Saltspring. Islanders swear its taste is unique, whether because of genetics, the salt air, or the diet of tofu, tabouli and quinoa that the sheep eat after firing up a doobie in Fulford Harbour (I might not have that quite right).

Alas, the sheep -- and sheep farmers -- have been vanishing ever since the province imposed tough new meat-inspection regulations three years ago tomorrow.

Farmers who were used to killing and butchering their own animals, or having a neighbour do it, were faced with the added time and expense of shipping their critters off-island to government-inspected abattoirs.

Local farmers complain they're being put out of business by rules appropriate to industrial-scale agriculture, not the bucolic pastures of Vancouver Island. Regulations aimed at preventing calamities like the avian flu that wiped out the Fraser Valley's highly concentrated poultry industry in 2004 are seen as, ahem, overkill for small-scale farmers, the ones who have been growing our food without incident for years. The regulations are called a cure in search of an illness, a solution to a problem that didn't exist.

Doesn't matter. The bottom line is that Saltspring's sheep population fell from 2,342 in 2005 to 1,302 in 2008 -- a decline of 44 per cent. The number of farmers raising livestock dropped from 100 to 68.

It has reached the point that it is now hard to get Saltspring Island lamb on Saltspring -- as unthinkable as being unable to get champagne in France, or dope on Lasqueti.

That's where the Save Saltspring Lamb fund comes in. Islanders are trying to raise the money to buy a mobile abattoir where farmers could take sheep, chickens, turkeys, pigs, goats, cattle and (cover your eyes, UVic!) rabbits for slaughter and packaging. The province will match what they raise up to a maximum of \$150,000. The campaign won't really kick off until after Thanksgiving, but already has more than \$10,000 in pledges, \$5,000 in real money and an offer of "something bigger" from an anonymous source, says Saltspring farmer Margaret Thomson.

The campaign also has the support of Hastings House, the high-end waterfront retreat on Ganges Harbour.

Partial proceeds from its Chefs Across The Water series, in which famous B.C. chefs fly in for guest appearances, go to the fund. Next up is Sean Brennan from Brasserie L'école in Victoria on Oct. 4.

If it seems a little odd that a frou-frou inn should take on a slaughterhouse as its cause of choice, Hastings House makes no apologies. "It's important for us to support local agriculture," says dining room manager Milly Sinclair.

Hastings House is also being pragmatic. The farmer who used to supply it with lamb quit doing so when the new meat rules took effect in 2007.

"We had a couple of years where it was really hard for us to get lamb," Sinclair said. It's back on the menu now, but at a premium; Hastings House pays twice as much for lamb as it did before the government stepped in to make the world safer.

Now, the province isn't the only culprit here, Thomson says. Working agricultural land is vanishing, too, the tractors and gumboots giving way to Range Rovers and Guccis. "People are buying up farms and building palaces and buying horses."

Call it farming if you want, but Canadians don't eat horses.

Still, it's the meat-inspection rules that have had the biggest impact, says Thomson, who has farmed on Saltspring for a dozen years -- heritage turkeys mostly, but also a small flock of Cotswold sheep.

This isn't just a Saltspring issue, of course. Farmers all over Vancouver Island quit raising sheep, poultry and other animals after 2007. But the pain is particularly painful for places like Saltspring, where dispatching sheep now means two round-trip ferry rides -- one to drop off the lambs, one to pick up the meat -- to Metchosin. That pretty much means two working days shot. There goes any profit margin.

Which is why, when the foodies gather at the feet of the rock star chefs at Hastings House, they're helping to buy the slaughterhouse that could allow the island's lambs to live (until eaten).

"It's just such an important part of Saltspring," Sinclair says.

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