

EASY EASTER

Leg of lamb makes a deliciously simple holiday dinner

By Deirdre O'Shea

Easter is a perfect time to take advantage of the availability of spring lamb, for a festive, gourmand's dinner that tastes heavenly yet is easy to prepare.

Although lamb can be had year-round now, depending on the country of origin, the best lamb is available but once a year.

"The true American springers, coming out in March and April, are tough to beat," says Evan Lobel, a fifth-generation butcher and co-owner of **Lobel's** New York, purveyor of gourmet meats at their Madison Avenue shop and online store.

"Lamb from different countries does have distinct flavors," Lobel says. "New Zealand and Australian lamb are closely related in flavor. We do like Australian lamb; we love American lamb."

New Zealand lamb tends to be a little on the gamy side, while Australian lamb is "not as gamy, and has more of a grassy flavor," he says. "American lamb doesn't have that gamy flavor. It has a clean, natural flavor to it with essence of grass. It's sturdy, it's wholesome, and it's got depth to it."

Icelandic lamb, new to the market, is mild in flavor, with a delicate texture. Lamb can be pricey — a whole leg of lamb can run from \$35 up to \$80. "There are always good choices within your budget," Lobel says, "if you have a little bit of knowledge."

Prices are affected by a lot of variables; one of the most important is the age of the lamb. "When you start getting into older lamb the meat looks red, almost like the color of venison meat, which is a dark, almost-purplish reddish," Lobel says. "The younger the lamb, the more rosy-pinkish the meat is."

Look for legs that are stocky and muscular versus long and narrow. Lobel recommends buying a leg of lamb that weighs 8 pounds at the most. At 9 pounds, it's old already, in his book. New Zealand lamb fetches the lowest price; American lamb, the highest.

A leg of lamb can be prepared bone-

in; boneless, where the bone is completely removed, then the roast is rolled and tied to keep its shape; or butterflied, where the boneless leg is left flat.

A bone-in leg of lamb will have a little more flavor. It has a traditional shape that looks nice on the serving platter. The downside is that it's difficult to carve.

Boneless and tied, the leg is easy to slice and has a more consistent shape, for even cooking.

A butterflied leg is intended for quicker cooking: marinating, grilling, or broiling. Well-marinated lamb will have tremendous flavor, and the butterflied shape allows a greater surface area to absorb the herbs and spices.

EVAN'S ROAST LEG OF LAMB

One bone-in leg of lamb, about 6 to 8 pounds.

1/4 cup extra-virgin olive oil
2 tablespoons Dijon mustard
2 roughly chopped garlic cloves
1/2 teaspoon chopped fresh rosemary
1/4 teaspoon freshly ground pepper
Yields 6 to 8 servings.

Combine olive oil, mustard, garlic, rosemary, and pepper to form a paste. Brush mixture over both sides of leg of lamb. Let lamb rest in refrigerator for at least 1 hour (but not more than 3 hours, or the flavor will be too strong). Remove from refrigerator 30 minutes before roasting.

Preheat oven to 350 F. In roasting pan, roast lamb in the middle of the oven for 1 1/4 to 1 1/2 hours, beginning to check for doneness after 1 hour. The roast is medium-rare when an instant-read thermometer inserted in the thickest part of the leg registers 135 F.

Allow the roast to rest for 15 minutes before carving.

"Most people like to call their lamb 'pink,'" Lobel says. "(They) don't like done too rare. Lamb is not at its best rare-like steak might be."

Lobel likes to serve leg of lamb with small string beans sautéed in butter and olive oil, and sprinkled with toasted pine nuts; and small roasted red potatoes. For a finishing touch, he suggests putting out an assortment of store-bought gourmet chutneys, such as mango or onion.

Fresh Vegetables Herald the Arrival of Spring

Spring Vegetable Sauté

Serves 6

3/4 pound new potatoes, cut in half
1/2 pound sugar snap peas, trimmed
2 tablespoons butter
3 to 4 small spring onions, thinly sliced
2 garlic cloves, minced
1/2 teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg
2 to 3 tablespoons chopped fresh mint
Salt

Freshly ground black pepper.

Place a large pot of salted water over high heat and bring to a boil. Add the potatoes and cook for 20 minutes or until tender. Add the snap peas during the last two minutes of cooking time. Drain. Heat the butter in a large skillet over medium heat. Add the onions and garlic and cook for five minutes or until tender. Add the potatoes, snap peas, nutmeg and mint. Toss to coat well. Season with salt and pepper to taste.



A roast leg of lamb makes an impressive presentation on the Easter table.