



Good **SHEPHERDS** of field and plate

BY LORI GREENE

Here in the hollow in early spring, when the nights can still turn cold and the coyotes cackle and cry around four in the morning; my neighbors on Olive Hill Road must startle in the night when they hear the wild howls. Keeping a watchful eye—and ear—is a good shepherd’s duty. A newborn lamb or goat is the most vulnerable of all.

We all feel a sense of neighborliness around here. Whether plowing your neighbor’s garden in the early spring, exchanging cakes and pies, dropping off the back quarter of a deer into your neighbor’s freezer or helping with a hog butchering, it makes sense to share. This might include some pasture land you have, just sitting there full of grass. Lush clover, fescue, bluestem and timothy grass make a nice salad bar for a herd of sheep. The best way to improve a pasture is to graze it...responsibly. It stimulates new growth and then there’s that lovely advantage of nitrogen-rich manure left behind.

Paul Troyer comes from a big Mennonite family up the road. They have been tending and butchering their own animals for generations. One day we find him moving two of his ewes into the safety of our stable. They’re close to lambing and in the stable they will be able to bed down in the soft hay, eat and wait. Our kids (little people, not goats) stand on hay bales to peek over the stall door, curious to see a newborn lamb. Lambs come in twins and triplets and sometimes the mother rejects one and it has to be hand raised. But we don’t tell the kids that.

Lately, it’s not just curious kids that want a better glimpse of this tradition. More and more chefs are drawn to the process, wanting to see how their meat is raised. And it’s easier to watch when the animals are raised humanely, when your next meal might support farming communities and develop a long lasting relationship with them, and when you know that you’re taking a stand against corporate farming and the cruelty of animal confinement.

Later in the spring, I see lambs springing up out of the tall grass in the neighbor’s pasture. They go through a stage when their little knobby legs are wound up like springs and they seem to rocket straight up into the air. I knew it was that time of year again; so, making my weekly vegetable deliveries, I mentioned to several chefs that Paul’s lambs would be available in the fall. Reinaldo Alphonso, chef de cuisine of Chez Philippe, was the first to get back to me. He wanted to come out for the day. Now, I realize that a chef’s time off is precious, so I was flattered that he was coming out to see us.

Reinaldo made it by noon, just in time to meet Paul moving the lambs to a plot of fresh grass. The sheep shied away from us until Paul came down the road and, recognizing the sound of his truck, they sang out one big bleating chorus of “Baaa” hopeful for some kind of grub. Paul casually moved the step-in posts of the electric fence, and the sheep trundled over to a fresh patch of ground. The sound of them tearing off bites of grass was so loud that I imagined them rolling up a carpet. Right then and there, Reinaldo said he wanted two.

Reinaldo wasn’t the first chef to don mud boots and walk through these pastures. Last winter, chef Stephen Hassinger took a few days away from The Inn at Hunt Phelan to watch Paul’s father, Nelson, make use of his years of experience as a butcher with the two hogs we raised—giving our Memphis friends a master class in pork chops. Nelson’s traditional approach was a perfect complement to Stephen’s knowledge of French charcuterie. Any vegetarian might have found it macabre, but for us omnivores who looked on, young and old alike, there was something inspiring in publicly honoring the creatures we had raised. After the initial shock, we were glad it was a clean, quick kill and we were glad that our hard work could feed our family and all our guests. Inside the house, my husband baked bread and warmed hot chocolate for everyone who bore witness in that chilly December air.

[Lori, Henry and Hattie Greene check out the Mennonite sheep.](#)

Is there a starker contrast between that scene and the typical life of livestock raised in sprawling feedlots? Whether it comes from hogs, cattle or sheep, most commercial meat emerges from a relentless drug regimen and a nightmare of unhygienic close confinement. Animals raised in this way barely know what life is by the time they are killed. And it's especially bad for the Easter lambs. Many farmers, knowing that lambs sold for Easter dinner will command a premium, have begun to tinker with the sheep's natural birth cycle. A typical ewe will be impregnated in the fall and give birth as the spring days turn warm, but those pegged for the Easter market are fed hormones and kept under artificial hours of dark and light, triggering the ewes' estrus much earlier. With the birth cycle shifted, the lambs are born into the deep chill of winter. Those few that survive the cold are fed a grain-only diet (which stresses these rumi-

nants' digestion) until they're shipped off en masse to the holiday market. These creatures are commodities.

Several chefs around Memphis, trying to escape from this ugly cycle, ended up ordering lambs from Paul last October. I respect the new vision of these chefs, as they revive the use of local products, the art of butchery, and "nose-to-tail" eating. One of the most committed people I know, Kelly English, executive chef at Restaurant Iris, had been envisioning a traditional method to use the whole lamb. The time had come, he said, for *barbacoa*.

Barbacoa is the extreme slow food. The process, developed in pre-Columbian times by the Taino Indians (who called it *barabicu*), was adopted by Mesoamericans and still plays an important role in village



Left: Chef Kelly English and Jonathan Magallanes discuss the best way to wrap the brined lamb (shown above) in banana leaves.

life there. More than a variation on our typical barbecue, barbacoa is the slow roasting of meats in an underground pit.

This fall, the lambs were taken to Fayette Packing in Eads for slaughter and the day of the barbacoa arrived. At Restaurant Iris, Kelly and Jonathan of Las Tortugas bundled the brined primal cuts of lamb in banana leaves. The cooking process would allow the lamb to steam inside the banana leaves and smoke within the pit, causing the sweet, moist meat to fall off the bone. Asked how he would compare this locally raised lamb to any he had cooked in the past, Kelly answered “If this lamb and New Zealand lamb were to fight, the local lamb would win.”

Out in the side yard of Restaurant Iris where he grows his herbs, Kelly had already dug the three-by-four-by-two foot pit. Sous chef Andrew Armstrong (who works at both Iris and Las Tortugas) wandered in and

Ordering whole lambs and sides

Want to try your hand at barbacoa? Or just want to stock your freezer with local lamb? Whole lambs are usually between 30 and 40 pounds. You can get either the whole carcass or have it cut up and individually packaged for a slightly higher cost. Local lamb is available at these two sources:

Fayette Packing Co.

16620 Highway 196, Eads • 901-867-3826

www.fayettepackingco.com

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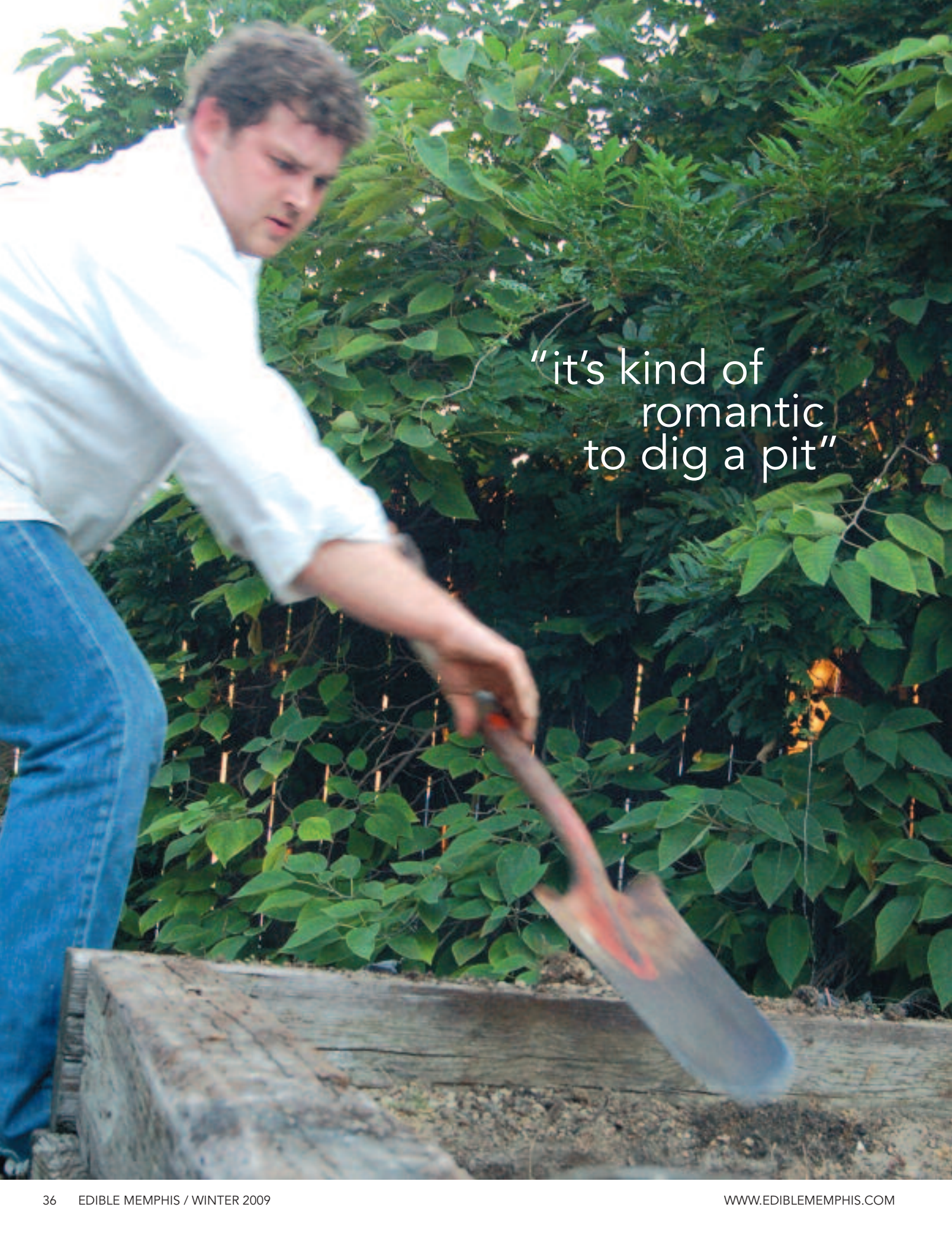
901-340-4969 • www.m4d-ranch.com

Orders taken all year, but must be ordered by July for October/November delivery.



Left: Careful of the heat radiating from the pit, Chef Kelly English arranges roasting racks and pans on the hot coals.

Above: The finished barbacoa lamb.
Photo by Paul Knipple



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began hatcheting up some pieces of hardwood. With the help of a kitchen blow torch and some charcoal, the pit was ablaze. The lamb was placed on a rack over a deep roasting pan to catch the juices, then topped with foil and finished off with the dirt from the pit piled on top. Another fire was started atop the dirt. Now, we wait.

It felt like a rite of passage for Kelly as we all talked of his upcoming marriage and celebrations to come, toasting the couple and chef with sweet tea and a communal bowl of grillades. Kelly commented “It’s kind of romantic to dig a pit.” I had to agree. All that smoldering wood and ash did have a ceremonial magic to it.

When we showed up for the unearthing, a lawn chair pulled up to the fire was evidence of Kelly’s 4AM check on the fire. It was pretty tricky sweeping away the dirt and peeling back the foil—still very hot. But when Kelly pulled a chunk off and divided it up between us, it was moist and beautiful, just as Kelly had promised. There has been nothing “fast” about this process. The wait made it taste even better. And the entire process involved quite a bit of sharing—stories, workload, time and traditions.

For his part in the process, Jonathan takes a share of the barbacoa lamb and later, at Las Tortugas, we fondly recall Kelly’s feast. Pepe Magallanes, owner of Las Tortugas, commented that barbacoa was “a blue collar thing” south of the border. But for those of us who take slow food seriously, good taste knows no class. *eM*

Lori Greene is a farming foodie-musician who lives in Memphis and Olive Hill, Tennessee with her husband Alex and their two kids, Henry and Hattie. When not unschooling their munchkins, she can be found researching heirloom vegetables, heritage breed livestock and rural renewal. She once brought two piglets home in cat carriers in the back seat of the family car. Check out the goings-on at www.downinghollowfarm.com.

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