WOOLLY THINKING



Mutton was once a staple of the British diet, but then it lost its place in our cooking pots to lamb. Matthew Fort thinks this is a bit loopy: why replace a meat packed with flavour for one that generally doesn't taste of much at all? Pictures by Colin Campbell

I got an email from Andrew the farmer the other day. "Interested in mutton? We're killing a three-year-old sheep." it read. Was I interested? *Was I ever*. I have dreamed of mutton for more than 20 years. Longer probably. Mutton is one of the forgotten masterpieces of British protein production. Bloody spring lamb has cornered the market, vaguely sweet, vestigially meaty, utterly gummy; fatless, tasteless, pointless; the perfect meat for today — devoid of interest in every way.

Mutton, on the other hand, is full of fat (and fat, as we know, or as we ought to know, is the primary carrier of flavour in meat). Consequently, mutton has a broad, rollicking, rolling, ripping, roistering flavour. It has texture and heft. Mutton is mighty; mighty good, mighty delicious, mighty mighty. Or so my memory told me. So I drove over to the farm to collect my leg, two breasts and a bag of bits — all mine for £24. And never has money been better spent. The bits were to be stewed, the breasts to be braised and then grilled, covered in a mixture more secret than KFC's chicken mix — I will give the recipe for that another day — and the leg was to be boiled or, more accurately, poached.

And then, blow me, hardly were plans for a mutton fest hatched than I received an invitation to a mutton lunch at the Ritz hotel, with the *man we call POW (Prince of Wales)* in tow, and it doesn't get much more nobby than that. The point of the lunch was to promote something called the Mutton Renaissance, though I couldn't help thinking that Mutton Resurrection would have been a more accurate title.

As a result of words spoken over lunch, I discovered that the world of mutton was much more complicated than I had ever imagined. For a start, it seems that there's no official agreement as to when sheep becomes mutton. I had always been under the impression that lamb was lamb for a year. Then it became hogget, which it remained for another year until it became mutton.

But then I read Laura Mason and Catherine Brown's epic (and invaluable) Traditional Foods Of Britain (Prospect Books), a copy of which should be compulsory in every British home, in which they say, "In theory, any sheep older than 12 months becomes mutton when killed for meat." What is a chap to do? And that's before we get into the finer points of wethers — castrated rams — and mule mutton crosses, which surfaced on the Ritz menu.

Anyway, I still stick to the lamb-hogget-mutton school of thought, and I'll leave the other refinements to the higher schools of agricultural philosophy. After all, the real point is, does mutton taste different from *lamb? Yes, unquestionably. Does it* taste better (ie, is it worth the extra dosh?)? Well, that is a matter of taste, as they say, though in my view the answer is again unquestionably yes. For one thing, the farmer has had his capital tied up for 12 months longer than he needs.

My boiled leg was milder than I had remembered, gentler and sweeter, but it still boomed away like a big bass drum. The fibre of the meat was coarser but well woven. And the sheer size of it drew cries of admiration. It looked splendid. It inspired awe. It produced demands for second helpings. Can a cook ask for more?

All recipes serve 10 or more (there's no point in cooking a leg of mutton for two or four or six; eight possibly).

Boiled leg of mutton

Your principal problem with this recipe is to find a pan large enough to hold the leg. It does have to be pretty enormous. You can sort of braise it in a roasting pan covered in foil. You can, of course, roast it very slowly (for at least three and a half hours at 150C/300F/gas mark 2), basting along the way.

1 leg of mutton (around 3.5kg)
2 onions
1 turnip →

Don't be sheepish: Mutton has a far greater depth of flavour than lamb, which is borne out to stunning effect in a slow-roasted loin with autumn vegetables. Home economist: Sarah Tildesley.

Giorgio Armani is not a man given to flamboyant emotionalism. In this he resembles, physically and by temperament, the clothes that he has so expertly tailored for what is now three decades. He is compact — if, to his eternal chagrin, a little short. He is spare, in the sense of adhering always to simplicity. "The essence of style," he has said, "is a simple way of saying something complex." (Armani's own wardrobe is simple to the point of self-effacement, consisting of an infinite number of midnight-blue T-shirts and endless identical black or beige trousers.) And he is discreet. He values discretion above all things, he tells me. "It is the enemy of vulgarity." He has based his entire style on discretion and risen to the height of his profession on that style. Armani remains, aged 70, the sole owner of his $2bn empire and, what's more, he says he has never owed anyone a penny. He keeps a $300m float in his business account. To detractors who say that you cannot tell a vintage Armani of, say, 20 years ago from an Armani of today — a criticism that was levelled against him after his major retrospective in New York a few years ago — he would cite the word "consistency".

If a definition of fashion is something of the moment, preoccupied with the new, then Armani has spent a career being devotedly anti-fashion. People in the business are constantly predicting his demise, but it doesn't happen. He has the reputation of being something of a potentate. He is also said to be a hard taskmaster — someone who won't tolerate imperfections (I watched him spend 20 minutes practising his signature before deciding which pen he was going to use for a book signing) — but is equally known to pay his staff extremely well. Like a lot of very successful people, he seems to combine the demagogic with the democratic — he has the common touch. A friend of his described him to me as "someone who is perfectly sure of who he is and what he does, and this certainty makes him completely free". But when I put this to him he demurred, if only slightly. "That's not clever. You have to have doubts. I have collaborators I work with. I listen and then I decide. That's how it works."

I recently spent four nervous-making days with him in New York. Nervous not because he is frightening — on the contrary, he goes out of his way to be affable and polite, and anyway he gives the impression of being someone who would absent himself from any situation that didn't suit. Nervous because of the sheer pace of the itinerary. Every day is crammed with promotional events, beginning with a 9am breakfast and going through to midnight — when Armani, who, with the exception of work, practises moderation in all things, unfailingly goes to bed. "Time is time," he says. "There is never enough time."

Armani always travels with a large retinue. On this occasion a handful of publicity people, a number of his senior executives, his personal assistant, bodyguards, family — his two nieces and his nephew — and friends. This is very pleasant, seductive even, because after a short while it takes on the easy familiarity of an extended family. Everyone calls everyone by their first name (except for Mr Armani, who is always referred to and addressed as Mr Armani). Logistics are not a problem because every time you step out of doors any number of black limousines are waiting. Clothes, also, are taken care of. I was gently advised that it would be easier if I borrowed an Armani wardrobe for the trip and so, after an extended fitting session, I did. And it was easier. It was, in fact, heavenly. To arrive at Eugenia Silva's luncheon for Mr Armani, held in his flagship store on Madison Avenue; at the Vanity Fair celebrity dinner, with "100 VVIPs", given by editor Graydon Carter and his new fiancee in Armani's honour; and most particularly at the black-tie Fashion Group International awards ceremony, at the massive Cipriani building on East 42nd Street, where Armani received the lifetime achievement award and where, I couldn't help noticing, American Vogue editor Anna Wintour was seated at the table behind us — and to know, to have full assurance, that you looked right, you could feel comfortable. To have none of that self-consciousness or stage fright normally associated with dress.

To take the terror out of fashion — this was Armani's revolution, his revelation 30 years ago, when he took the skeleton out of the traditional Savile Row suit, dispensed with the lining, moved the buttons, changed the proportions of the lapels, softened the shoulders, and invented, as if, hey presto, the deconstructed jacket. He gave us fluidity where previously only stiffness had been.

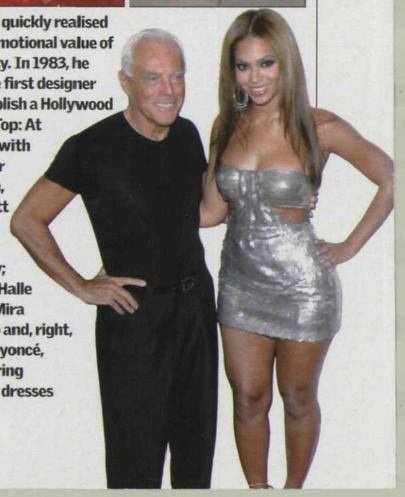
His suits were sexy, just like the planes and the cars that the executives who wore them travelled in. His style became a statement about personal →



REX FEATURES (4)







Armani quickly realised the promotional value of celebrity. In 1983, he was the first designer to establish a Hollywood office. Top: At a show with Jennifer Aniston, Brad Pitt and George Clooney; Above: Halle Berry, Mira Sorvino and, right, with Beyoncé, all wearing Armani dresses