

Karakul Sheep | Ark of Taste Nomination Form

PRODUCT NAME

Karakul Sheep

CATEGORY

Breeds

COUNTRY

United States of America



PRODUCT DESCRIPTION

From the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy: <http://www.albc-usa.org/cpl/karakul.html>

The Karakul breed originated in Central Asia, and its name comes from the village of Kara Kul (or Black Lake), which lies in the Bokhara region between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan near the Caspian and Black Seas. Karakuls were historically used for the production of meat, fat, wool, and pelts. Of most value were the pelts of lambs, called Persian lambskins or astrakhan, which were used to make a variety of warm, soft, and elegant garments.

Karakul sheep were introduced into the United States between 1909 and 1936. The population in North America has been genetically divergent from Central Asian stocks since the time of importation, and this warrants classification of the American Karakul as a separate breed. Karakuls were imported to establish a pelt industry in the United States, but this effort was not successful, and the breed has always been relatively rare.

The Karakul is a member of the family of fat-rumped and broad-tailed sheep. This breed family originated in Central Asia and Northern Africa, and it is characterized by the deposit of fat at the base of the tail instead of throughout the body. This fat is distinctive in texture and flavor from other body fat and is highly valued in the cuisine of Central Asia. The rest of the carcass is very lean.

The soft birthcoat of the Karakul matures into a fleece of carpet wool, which consists of a long, lustrous outer coat and a fine, soft inner coat. Adding interest to this unusual fleece is the breed's array of colors. Most sheep are born black and fade to gray with age, but red, tan, gold, and brown also occur.

Handspinners and weavers provide the market for most of the Karakul wool produced in this country. Fleeces weigh five to ten pounds and have a staple length of six to twelve inches. Though used primarily for the production of wool, Karakuls are multipurpose sheep with many valuable characteristics. They are hardy and adaptable, thriving under rugged conditions in a variety of climates. The sheep are aggressive grazers and browsers, useful wherever pastures need improvement.

Karakuls are generally seasonal breeders, producing a single lamb. Ewes are attentive mothers that milk very well. Karakuls are medium in size, weighing 125 - 175 pounds. Rams are horned and ewes are polled.

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PRODUCT TASTE

The Karakul holds a unique place in American culinary history as having been the only true fat-tailed breed in the United States. Fat-tailed breeds are common in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa, and as such Karakul meat has been a literal taste of home for generations of immigrants and their children in the United States. The tail of the sheep is used in many Middle Eastern dishes. The fat is rendered into tallow, called “rowghan” in Farsi or “allyah” in Arabic, which is then used much as tallow once was in American cooking: to add juiciness and flavor to grilled meat, to grease cookware, or to add the mild flavor to a dish. Sheep with fat tails accumulate fat deposits in a different manner than other sheep, which is why in taste tests conducted in the United States with immigrants from Asia, Africa, and even Latin America (where fat tails are not common), the Karakul consistently scored higher on juiciness than the other breeds tested (Griffin et al., 1992).

Karakul also has a milder flavor profile than European-descended breeds of sheep, which has enamored it to many people averse to more “muttony” flavors.

There are many dishes Karakul works well for, but I’ll limit it to three here. First, there is no sheep better for kabob than the sheep breed with which kabob was first made. Kabobs are a Middle Eastern dish from the same regions that first developed Karakuls, and the flavor profile of the Karakul is perfect for this style of cooking. Many immigrant nationalities and families have their own recipes, but I’ll describe one that is near universal: skewered kabob. First, cubed Karakul meat (often from the sirloin or loin) is put on skewers with various vegetables such as peppers and onions. Seasonings are added, and then the tallow from the sheep’s tail is melted over the meat as it grills. Often, the person grilling it will fan the charcoals to impart a smokey, earthy flavor. I grew up eating this dish, for which my father went out and specially bought Karakul lamb.

Another common kabob recipe that Karakul shines in is the ground skewered kabob. The cooking method is similar to skewered kabob, but the tail fat is added to ground lamb meat directly rather than rendered into tallow. This maintains the juiciness while placing the ground kabob on the skewer. The spices used often include grated onion, sumac, and black pepper.

Finally, the Karakul is also prized by celebrants of the Easter holiday, as its fat tail makes it very similar to the fat-tailed breeds mentioned in the Bible. Many people enjoy the shank or a leg of lamb to celebrate Easter with the Karakul.

Of course, it is also favored for Muslim holidays such as Eid al Fitr and Eid al Adha.

Here is the study that discusses Karakul juiciness: Griffin, C. L., Orcutt, M. W., Riley, R. R., Smith, G. C., Savell, J. W., & Shelton, M. (1992). Evaluation of palatability of lamb, mutton, and chevon by sensory panels of various cultural backgrounds. *Small Ruminant Research*, 8(1–2), 67–74. doi:10.1016/0921-4488(92)90008-R

PRODUCT HISTORY

From the American Karakul Sheep Registry: <http://www.karakulsheep.com/>

The Karakul is possibly the oldest breed of domesticated sheep. Archaeological evidence indicates the existence of the Persian lambskins as early as 1400 B.C., and carvings of a distinct Karakul type have been found in ancient Babylonian temples. Although known as the “fur sheep”, the Karakul provided more than beautifully patterned silky pelts for its owner.

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These sheep also were a source of milk, meat, tallow, and fiber. The wool of the adult Karakul (a very strong fiber) was felted or spun into fabric for garments, footwear, carpets, and yurts, among other uses.

The Karakul is native to Central Asia and is named after a village called Karakul. Karakul lies in the valley of the Amu Darja River in the former emirate of Bokhara, West Turkestan. This region is now known as Uzbekistan. It is one of high altitude, with scant desert vegetation and a limited water supply. This made for a difficult life, which imparted to the breed a hardiness and an ability to thrive under adverse conditions. This is distinctive of the modern Karakul.

Karakuls were first introduced to the United States between 1908 and 1929. Pelt production was the goal, but very few animals were obtained. It was of course necessary to cross them with other breeds to obtain the quantity of pelts required by the fledgling industry. The first cross produced quality fur pelts, but there was an inadequate number of purebreds to guarantee the success of the industry. Eventually the flocks were dispersed, and many of the original rams were lost. The introduction of other breeds into the bloodlines has resulted in wide variations in body type and fleece characteristics. This lack of uniformity is apparent also in the native flocks.

It is interesting, however, that the true Karakul traits that are so unique to the breed continue to persist even though other breeds have been introduced. This has left us with a type of sheep having a rather wide definition, but it cannot be argued that the characteristics which Karakuls have in common with each other are distinctive and make them quite different from any other sheep breed found in the US today.

HISTORICAL PRODUCTION AREA

The Karakul was first imported to the United States to start up a pelt industry. Major flocks rose especially in the Southwest, which features a climate as arid and extreme as those from which the sheep was originally imported. The center of Karakul production, before the severe reduction in registered sheep, spanned from Texas north to Colorado, and west to the rest of the Southwest. The largest flock of Karakuls in American history was in New Mexico, for example. Because Karakuls were developed in arid and semi-arid environments characterized by woody shrubs and sparse herbaceous forage, they thrived in these areas of the United States. After this initial boom of Karakul numbers, the population stabilized primarily in California, which coincidentally is also the home of many Iranian immigrants who favor this breed for the reasons I discussed in the culinary section.

At present, California remains the state with the highest number of registered Karakul breeders, though Karakul can be found elsewhere (I'm from Virginia, for example, where there are two registered breeders).

FOR WHAT REASON IS THIS PRODUCT OR BREED AT RISK OF DISAPPEARING?

Estimate of the approximate quantity produced? Less than 2000.

Its lack of commercial lamb production characteristics, and the collapse of the fur industry, led this breed to decline in numbers. Now it is maintained primarily by small farms, including hobby farms, fiber farms, and farms that do limited direct sales of meat.

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IS THE PRODUCT FOR SALE ON THE MARKET?

Yes, usually in direct farm sales.

NAME OF PERSON SUPPLYING THE APPLICATION

Shayan Ghajar

PERSONAL MOTIVATION

This breed of sheep is what got me into shepherding and fiber arts. I do not own any at present but I have a deep appreciation for the breed and for its history, heritage, and fiber and meat.