



## Top quality Charollais lambs supply multi-award winning rural business - Carroll Barber reports

**R**ob and Helen Mutimer have over the past 9 years created a large-scale and highly successful farm butchery business at Woodland Farm, Swannington in Norfolk.

The main enterprise on the farm is a herd of 600 free-range sows with all the offspring finished. “The pig business was running well; all our pigs were being sold to Waitrose and the system was relatively simple, but not very exciting” explains Rob.

The farm shop started on a small scale but Rob was soon

enthused by the challenge and interaction with the public and the catering trade. Today the shop supplies 85 different wholesale customers across Norfolk. The split of the business is around 50% direct to customers and 50% to wholesale buyers.

“We supply the whole range of customers right from the low price burger vans up to high-class restaurants” An interesting factor of the trade is the difference in seasons and area within Norfolk. The City of Norwich has a thriving

community of restaurants and Rob has benefited from the steady growth in quantity of meals being eaten out by consumers. This trade is very strong in the winter. In the summer trade switches to the Norfolk coastline, which is so popular with holiday makers and also it is the wedding season.

Pork is still the biggest product sold by Swannington Farm to Fork but lamb meat is also a popular and important product line for the Mutimers.

The farm has some beautiful low lying meadows beside the Swannington Beck a tributary of the river Wensum, which is home to a flock of 350 North Country Mules and Texel and Suffolk cross ewes.

“We started with the mules and have now retained some of our home-bred cross ewes. We run to very high health standards with our pig herd and wanted to follow a similar regime with the sheep, so buying out of markets was not an option,” explains Helen, whose is a fully qualified veterinary surgeon.

The land is light so the flock is over-wintered on fodder



beet, which has proven slightly problematic with the different ewe breeds in the flock. “We found that the diet of ad-lib fodder beet did not suit the Texel cross ewes, who put on too much condition with resulting incidences of prolapse.”

The challenge of the sheep flock is to have ready 8 – 10 lambs every week of the year to supply the shop. Six years ago they starting using Charollais rams to improve growth rate and carcass quality. “We look for performance recorded results and select with greatest emphasis on muscling traits, but also linked with a good growth EBV. On the mule we can go for a ram with a slightly higher figure for fat, without problems.”

The flock lambs down outside with the ewes and lambs being penned inside for a short period before being turned back outside on fresh grass paddocks. “Easy lambing is vital for our system and with the Charollais we have very few births that require assistance. Also the lambs are lively and quick to suckle.” The field used for lambing is grazed by the pigs afterwards, so this rotates and cuts back any disease issues.



### ***North Country Mule ewe with her week-old Charollais cross lambs at Woodland Farm, Swannington.***

The ewes rearing singles go up to the Norfolk coast where the grass tends to come earlier and these lambs then get away 1st. The stronger twins are batched up together and smaller triplets make up a further group to achieve continuity of supply.

Some lambs are sold to a local abattoir (around 25%) if there are too many for the needs of the shop and also if the price is high. This leaves 75% which are sold direct. The Charollais cross lambs finish well at a range of weights which gives the Mutimers flexibility; carcass weights ranging from 18 – 28 kgs,

graded U3 and R3L are marketed successfully through the shop and wholesale outlets. “The catering trade is looking for a larger carcass, which are lambs that would be penalised by the abattoir.”

Carcass structure is also important. “At Easter we have a high demand for leg joints, but in the summer racks of lamb are very popular for weddings and we have developed a cutting technique to use the shoulders for a Greek style dish that goes down well in pubs. Plenty of muscle without fat right through the carcass is what



we need.”

The meat business has been so successful that Rob and Helen will soon be faced with a decision whether to expand further, which would mean a change of premises. They have invested in time-saving machinery; bacon slicing and sausage making machines but Rob says the most useful element is the bar coding technology which links back to the accounting programme.

“With many customers taking in excess of 20 different lines in one order, we have to use this technology to be efficient.”

The future of the sheep flock is also changing; “we purchased some Romney ewe lambs last year is a move towards a more self-sufficient ewe breed that in time will lamb and stay outside. We will see how they perform and whether this is a move in the right direction.”

These will be tuppied by Charollais and hopefully this will take away some of the workload from Helen’s shoulders to give her more time with their young family.



***North Country Mule ewe with Charollais sired lambs.***

***Texel Cross ewe with Charollais sired lambs.***

