

Venison meets European ethics

New Zealand's farm-raised venison has a descriptive story bound to appeal to German diners, **Gerald Piddock** is told.

New Zealand venison is ideally placed to take advantage of changing consumer trends in its critical German market.

The deer industry's outdoor-farmed, pasture-fed farm system puts it in a prime position among affluent German consumers looking for alternatives to meat farmed in Europe.

The power of Brand New Zealand is huge in the German marketplace because its consumers relate farming to intensively rearing animals indoors, Berlin-based New Zealand-born chef Shannon Campbell says.

"Even without spelling it out to them, people will instantly relate New Zealand products to high quality, animal welfare, lots of space - the general image of New Zealand."

Consumers are also wanting to know more about the origin of the food they buy and are looking for alternatives to the highly intensive farm systems used to produce much of Europe's meat.

"They really, really want to get away from eating that industrial product."

"If you can come at them with a descriptive, concise story that sums it up briefly, that sticks in their head, then I think you have won half the battle already."

That presents a huge opportunity for New Zealand, he says. Venison importer Axel Miltzow says there is a growing awareness among German consumers that food practices have to be environmentally sustainable.

They are shifting from quick, easy, convenient meals to taking their time and cooking more. He credits this shift to the growth of popularity of cooking shows that emphasise fresh 'clean' and healthy meat ingredients.

Miltzow is responsible for importing a large range of products, including New Zealand venison for German retailer Citti and its food service arm, Chef's Culinar. He is based at Kiel, north of Hamburg.

Citti and Chef Culinar operate large retail stores and offer logistics services targeting both trade and consumers.

It has long been a deer industry goal to build year-round demand for venison at chilled prices. About 15 years ago, in conjunction with Deer Industry New Zealand, he organised a series of tastings of venison at German supermarkets as an option for the barbecue.

It was successful and they continue to do those tastings today for wholesale and private customers.

"Eighty per cent of the people who taste it do buy it in the same minute. They taste it, they say: 'This is great', then they buy," Miltzow says.

Rather than stick strictly to shopping lists, people want to be inspired when they are inside a store.

"This really works and people really appreciate the quality and they will buy."



New Zealand's outdoor 'free range' style of farming is a great marketing tool for the deer industry in Germany.



Venison denver leg is a popular cut among restaurant chefs.

Limited supply means tastings can not be organised weekly and with the variety available to consumers, venison falls back in line with other meat choices.

"Then it again becomes a niche product and because venison is so strong here as a traditional dish, if you ask people what they think about venison, they say that it's great and we always have it as a roast at Christmas with family."

These winter dishes inevitably include heavy gravy, dumplings and cabbage.

Miltzow says he is trying to build more awareness around New Zealand venison's attributes, including its milder taste and tenderness when compared to local wild venison and push it as an eating option beyond being a traditional Christmas dish.

This includes using it for prime cuts for the summer barbecue or frying pan.

"Everyone loves New Zealand, people love travelling to New Zealand. Ten to 15 years ago, every

young kid after finishing school went to the US. Now they go to Australia and New Zealand and so this is a story you can tell and an awareness you can build," Miltzow says.

"We are promoting mainly the forecuts - the topside, rump and knuckle to use for steaks."

They are also trying to promote venison stir fry cuts to be used as a stir fry option instead of its current use in goulash.

"We are trying to change all of these things, but it is a long way to go," he says.

This is because venison is competing against other protein choices.

Deer Industry New Zealand (DINZ) venison marketing manager Marianne Wilson says the organisation has spent \$400,000 on joint promotions with individual marketers to push venison as a year-round dining option.

"These promotions are quite varied, depending on the market and customers being targeted.

Some are quite substantial. Priorities for the companies include food service channels in the United States and year-round supply to German retail outlets."

The concept of eating venison as a summer grilling item is still quite novel in Europe and it generates quite a lot of discussion among chefs and diners, she says.

What New Zealand farm-raised venison has to offer is increasingly resonating with influential chefs and a new generation of consumers open to new culinary concepts.

"Add to that a growing preference for grass-fed red meat in important markets and an insistence by gatekeepers on food safety and quality assurance standards that New Zealand farmed venison can deliver."

Traditionally, venison export sales have been heavily reliant on the German game trade which is highly seasonal, with demand and prices peaking for the supply of chilled venison in September/

early October.

While venison production is down this season, chilled venison sales are growing. The average schedule price paid to farmers peaked in mid-October at \$8.83 a kilogram, marginally ahead of last season's spring peak of \$8.63.

However, the firming Kiwi dollar against the Euro is hiding an underlying market improvement.

At €0.65, the dollar is well above its 10-year average and 8 per cent up on the same time last year.

"With farmers rebuilding their herds, export venison tonnages were down 11 per cent in the year to August 2016. Total value was down 2 per cent.

"In contrast, chilled venison export volumes were up 7 per cent and returns up 16 per cent as marketers increased sales outside the European autumn market," she says.

"As a result, the shoulders of the peak chilled demand period are spreading." The United States (671 tonnes) and Germany (559 tonnes) remain the largest chilled markets, but if Belgium and the Netherlands were treated as a single market, it would be the biggest (863 tonnes)."

Dusseldorf-based chef Volker Drkosc says more affluent consumers generally buy venison. People often refuse to eat it because rather than knowing it is farmed, they believe it is hunted and has a strong taste.

"But once they try it, they enjoy it very much and you can do a lot of things with venison.

"I really enjoy working with it because it is very easy for us. It's good quality and you can go in all different directions. You can make Asian-style, you can do it European-style, you can barbecue it, you can have it cold or hot."

Gerald Piddock travelled to Germany with funding from The New Zealand Guild of Agricultural Journalists, Deer Industry New Zealand and Silver Fern Farms.