



Production Area

Norvegia

Nordland, Rogaland, Hordaland
and Sør Trøndelag Counties

Producers

400 Norsk Villsaulag breeders
(Villsau sheep breeders' association)



Villsau sheep

Slow Food **Presidia** are local projects that work to improve the infrastructure of artisan food production. The goal of the Presidia is to guarantee a viable future for traditional foods by stabilizing production techniques, establishing stringent production standards, and promoting local consumption. The Presidia project is coordinated by the Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity, which organizes and funds projects that defend our world's heritage of agricultural biodiversity and gastronomic traditions.

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Slow Food Foundation
for Biodiversity

Grasslands, heathlands and shrubs

The Norwegian Villsau (or 'wild') sheep belongs to the Gammel Norsk Sau family, one of the most ancient sheep breeds still extant in Northern Europe. These small and hardy animals have adapted to living in exposed coastal areas all year round, using the landscape's resources to find food and shelter. Pastures of uncultivated, semi-natural field vegetation such as heathlands, unfertilized grasslands and shrubs provide most of their fodder.

The animals are short-tailed with a double coat of fleece that can appear in any of the colors of sheep wool due to the genetic disposition of the breed. The males and some of the females have horns.

The meat of this breed is known for its high quality and flavor. This is partly due to the sheep's body fat, which is distributed differently than that of other breeds, with bigger fat deposits around the viscera and less around the muscles. The muscle fibers are marbled with a fine pattern of fat, which makes the mutton more



tender. The wild and varied diet of these sheep (heather, shrubs, herbs, natural grass pastures and seaweed) also contributes to the mutton's unique flavor.

The lamb is used in traditional dishes such as pinnekjøtt (smoked ribs) and fenalår (smoked leg), while waterproof blankets are made from the wool and rugs from the skin.

During the 19th century, new, bigger sheep breeds were imported from abroad whose wool was better suited to industrial treatment. Most farmers switched to raising these modern breeds, and there was little attention given to the lost quality of the meat. A systematic conservation project was organized during the 1950s when Norsk Villsaulag, the association of Villsau sheep breeders, was founded. Today it boasts 400 members in the coastal counties of Nordland, Rogaland, Hordaland and Sør-Trøndelag.

Although the breed itself is no longer threatened, the traditional method of rearing these animals is under strong pressure from abattoirs, which pay more for bigger lambs, and from the limited economic output this breed yields. Consequently, many breeders are considering giving up traditional techniques.

The Presidium

The presidium will work in collaboration with the Heathland Center at Lygra (a research center managed by local farmers and the University of Bergen) to promote the breed and to help the breeders improve the market for their products at a local level.

One of the main problems facing farmers is the limited number of abattoirs in the region. Traditional home slaughtering for commercial use has been forbidden since 1994 by agreements made between Norway and the EU over the past 10-20 years. This means that animals that have lived their entire lives in freedom spend the end of their lives in transit for several hours to one of the central abattoirs. The idea of mobile abattoirs as a solution to this problem has been raised many times but is still very difficult to achieve.

