



## Reaping the Harvest

*A conversation about public perception, consumer demand,  
brisket splitters, and Judas sheep*

interview by TAMAR ADLER photos by JULIO DUFFOO



I HAVE WORKED WITH SUPERIOR FARMS BEFORE, as nearly everyone has, directly or indirectly, who has purchased or eaten lamb in the western United States. Ask a farmer at the farmers' market where he "takes his lambs," and chances are, he'll say Superior. Ask your butcher's counter where the lamb is from, and it's likely you'll hear "Superior." Superior Farms, however, is not a farm at all but, in the words of vice president of operations Shane MacKenzie, "the largest solution provider for lamb and veal in the U.S." Superior's mandate is formidable: The problem they work to solve isn't actually lamb and veal, but rather the ever-changing tastes of a demanding public and the slim profit margins of animal agriculture.

Superior, based in Davis, California, with offices in Dixon, Denver, Boston, and Los Angeles, slaughters, processes, and moves 4,000 to 5,000 lambs (about 300,000 pounds of meat) a week, sourced from 40 states and sold in at least that many. The company — which started in 1963 as a small slaughterhouse in Washington state — now owns and operates two of the four major small-animal slaughterhouses in the country and employs 405

people in various administrative and operating locations. It is employee-owned, and counts among its employee-owners Ph.D.s, MBAs, men, women, whites, blacks, Hispanics, Christians, and Muslims.

Over several conversations with MacKenzie and his Dixon, California-based plant manager, Greg Ahart, in mid-October, I learned about the technicalities of lamb slaughter and the lexical hazards involved in describing it. My impressions were of childlike astonishment. I was mesmerized by the clean efficiencies of that cold, grand factory: gasps of pumps and whirl of conveyor belts; racks that stand in neat, symmetrical formations, hung with lamb heads or livers; color-coded hard hats; cold-water misters cooling rows of peach-hued carcasses. In that vast operation, I met all the industriousness and ingenuity of a bygone age of manufacturing, and was entranced. Finally wedging myself through the tiny keyhole of fortress-like industrial meat, I felt the curiosity of a stowaway and also the solemn duties of an emissary. I spoke to Shane and Greg separately, but our conversations ran to so many of the same topics that for the sake of continuity, I've strung them together below.



**What is the correct term for what you do? I've heard the word "harvest" used for "slaughter."**

**SHANE MACKENZIE:** Yes. We "harvest" and "disassemble." We never use the terms "slaughter" or "kill" with the media. In house we'll call it a "kill floor." For the media we call it a "harvest floor." People don't want to think about it like that. They don't want to know where their food comes from.

**You sound resentful, as though you'd like them to think about it. Isn't there an opportunity to educate by using frank language?**

**SHANE:** My background is in education. I was a high-school agriculture teacher, and we give 40 to 60 tours a year to community colleges and high schools in the Bay Area. But people in high-population areas aren't going to change just because I want them to. There may be a dichotomy here between myself and what we believe as a company.

**Let's talk about it technically. What happens to lambs when they get to the Dixon harvest plant?**

**GREG AHART:** Lambs get in between afternoon and midnight, and the next morning at 6 a.m., we start the process. We have lead sheep, or Judas sheep, who go in among the group of lambs and start to walk toward the incline that leads to the harvest floor. At the last minute, they make a right, and the rest of the lambs head up the shoot. Lambs are gregarious by nature, so they are used to being led.

**Did you just say "Judas sheep"?**

**GREG:** Oh, they're going to hell for sure. There are ewes that were here before them, and their mothers before them. They teach each other how to do it. It's the family business.

**Once they've been betrayed, how are the lambs killed?**

**GREG:** There's a conveyor belt called "the restrainer," which is a sort of "v" shape with the middle cut out. The lambs are knocked unconscious with an electric stun, and the restrainer sort of lifts them up and moves them along and a gentleman goes through with a very sharp knife, cuts both carotid arteries, and then they're hung to bleed. Two people work in the bleeding area, and they're

both of the Islamic faith. We harvest halal.

### **What happens after they're slaughtered?**

**GREG:** In the harvesting area, everything runs on an overhead chain. There's a variety of machinery involved in the process. There's a head snapper, a pelt puller, wash cabinets, a brisket splitter, and other things I'd rather not name just because it's not conducive to putting in an article.

### **Why not? Do you think you're going to turn people vegetarian?**

**GREG:** I hope not. But meat is an agricultural product, and it goes through a harvesting process. There's a lot that happens to food to get it from a harvested state to a consumable state. There are corn dryers, almond hullers, stuff I would read about and look at and say, "Huh, that's weird."

### **What are the details of disassembly, without machine names?**

**GREG:** Well, the first order of business is to get the hide off the animal, because that's the dirty part, and where there's the possibility of contamination. Anywhere where we've got skin on bone, we've got to do knife work, but sheep have a membrane that allows you to pull the hide off the lamb, once you've worked around the rib cage and so on. At that point it's like peeling the lid off a yogurt container. Once the hide's off, we can begin the evisceration process — removing the digestive tract, the liver, heart, and kidneys.

### **I've noticed that Superior has "standard" lamb and "pure" lamb. What's the difference?**

**SHANE:** None. For the "pure" label, growers just sign an affidavit saying they didn't give the animals any antibiotics or hormones. The thing is, no one gives lambs hormones anyway. Our sales of pure lamb are not huge. People don't want to pay more for it.

### **How do you decide whom you buy from? What criteria do you use?**

**SHANE:** That they've got healthy animals under 12 months of age. We buy from 200. There's no specification as to the size of the farm, or what the lambs are fed. Hopefully they're raised humanely, but we have no proof of that.

### **Would you be able to tell if they weren't?**

**SHANE:** You can see stress in their wool. There's a wool break if they're under stress, or you'll see bruises if there's physical harm. It's a loss to us if we have to cut a bruise off, but it's usually just from them banging into something.

### **I've been skirting around this, but I guess I'm asking about feedlots. How do lambs fare in them?**

**GREG:** It's not an optimal situation, because sheep are great grazers. But they're seasonal breeders, which means they don't like to get pregnant during the summer. We have facilities that need to operate 12 months a year, which is where feedlots come in. Lambs in feedlots will gain faster than lambs in pasture, which helps you manage your supply. We often buy smaller lambs, put them in feedlots, and then raise them to what we consider market weight in less time than it takes on pasture. That's how we can fill the gaps. There are some feedlot operators that have 40,000 lambs in inventory.

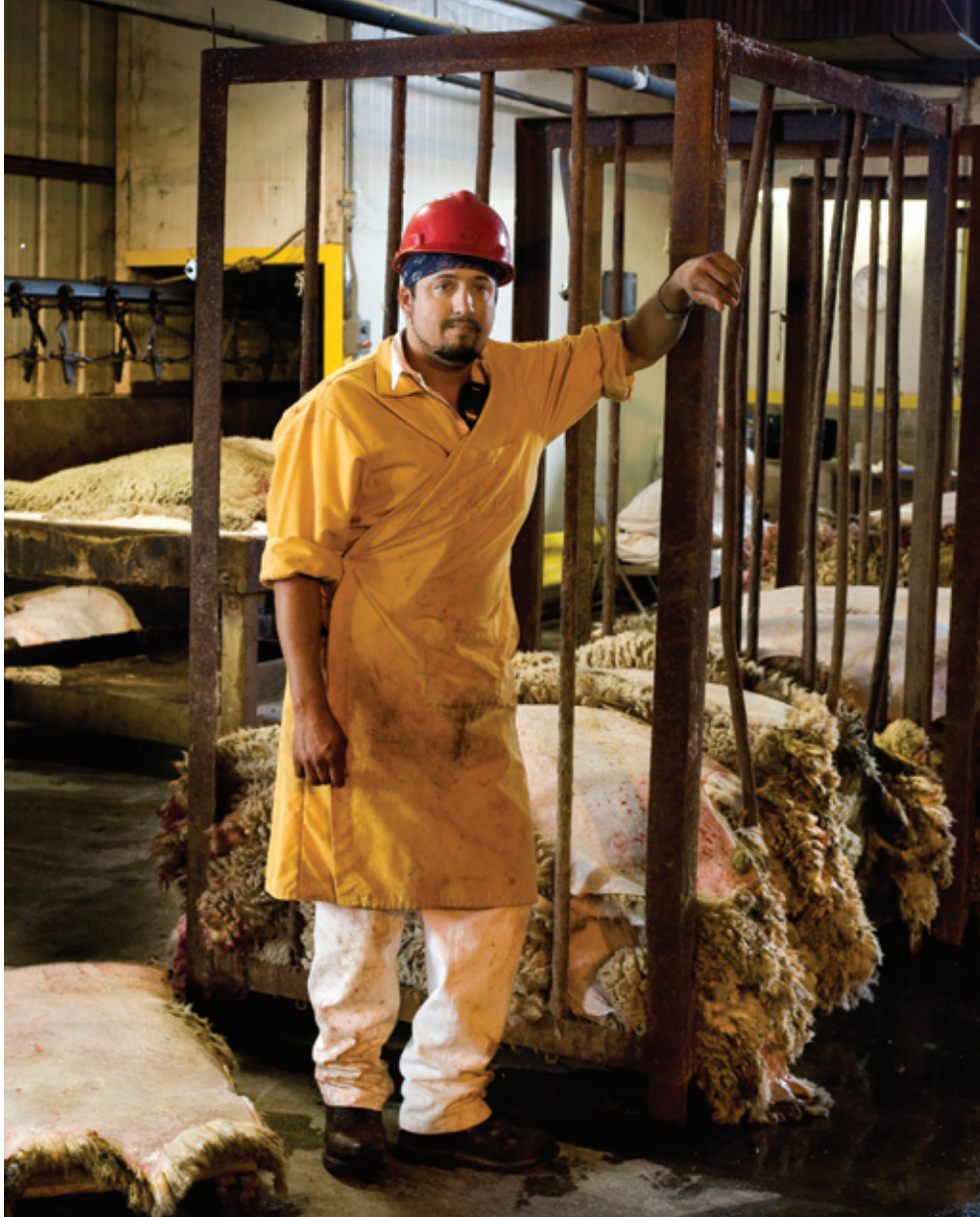
*There's a head snapper, a pelt puller, wash cabinets, a brisket splitter, and other things I'd rather not name.*

### **Do you market lambs differently depending on whether they've grazed their whole lives or been fattened in feedlots?**

**GREG:** No, and I've noticed no difference. Think of it like this: They're teenagers. They're still in growth patterns, so you don't have the excess condition that comes with maturity. Cattle are grown — they're two-and-a-half years old. In my mind the optimum situation is still lambs grazing on grass. Happy lambs, happy cows. It's very good for public perception.

### **Beyond the taste component, is that perception justified?**

**GREG:** I don't know how to answer that question. The feedlots I've seen are well managed. They're not like the bad, grainy footage you see on TV that's going to outrage you. But sheep, more than other animals, spend a lot of time free ranging.



**What do you say to people who say lamb should be a seasonal product?**

**GREG:** In an ideal situation, sure, but we've got 140 employees at this plant alone, who need weekly paychecks. If we had a customer who said they wanted only pasture-raised lamb, we would say we can't get you that 52 weeks a year, we can get you that 32 weeks a year. If all customers wanted that, we would adjust.

**Last year, the United States imported nearly half of its lamb. You also sell New Zealand lamb. Is that because there isn't enough lamb being raised in the U.S. to meet demand?**

**SHANE:** There are fewer and fewer lambs to process

in this country. The majority of this country's sheep producers are Basque. They emigrated, and built and grew their sheep businesses, and now their children don't want them. They don't want to stand around thousands of sheep in the middle of winter waiting for them to lamb [give birth]. It's definitely a concern. At some point there will be no lambs to process.

**Is there a contradiction between your sense that things should be run more naturally and the fact that you run the biggest lamb company in the country?**

**GREG:** Do I have internal angst over it? No. I think we do more than anyone would ever realize in terms of respecting the agricultural commodity that we handle. [m](#)