

## out & about

# Wild Arctic muskox harvest on Banks Island brings employment to the Inuit of the North



*The carcasses are hung and inspected by the Agriculture Canada inspection team before being broken down into primals, individually bagged and ready for shipment.*

Several years have passed since Hills Foods Ltd. first began selling muskox meat to the export and local HRI market. In the beginning, it was a novelty to most, like many of the game meats we searched out and acquired for sale. The idea of selling unique protein alternatives was not necessarily a new one, but to focus all effort on this very specialized market niche was an innovative approach.

The primary motivation for Hills Foods was - realizing the desire of local chefs and restaurateurs - to have something new or different to tantalize their creative juices, and at the same time allow for a more competitive edge on the less aggressive or less imaginative competition. Besides, in the 90s, everyone and their uncle is touting low fat, low fat, low fat. Game meats and specialty poultry certainly fit the bill. Not only are they low fat, but more flavourful compared to domestic livestock (beef, chicken and pork). Wild Arctic muskox is a natural.

Culinary Team Canada has experienced notoriety through their handling and preparation of wild Arctic muskox on several occasions, most recently in Berlin at the 1996 World Culinary Olympics. The first gold ever awarded in Berlin went to Canada for their hot entree using muskox meat.

The Inuit peoples of the North have enjoyed the high protein and excellent flavour of muskox

Careful records of sex and age of the carcasses are taken as well as critical visual study to assure the health of each carcass for human consumption. The hides are pulled and separated from the very expensive kiviut (hair/wool). What the locals don't keep for themselves is shipped to South America to be made into muskox sweaters to be sold back to Canada in tourist shops. Once the carcasses are completely finished, they are moved into the "natural" blast freezer (outside along the rail exposed to the cold). The rail continues on to a second tent where the carcasses are broken down into primals (hinds, loins and fore quarters), individually bagged and ready for air shipment off the island and eventually to a federal plant further south for custom cutting and value added processing, ready for local and export sale.

That night, back at the barracks, we discussed all aspects of the harvest with the on-site wildlife officer, Agriculture Canada inspectors, the meat processing manager, the Inuit directors and the buyers (Hills Foods and our eastern partner Thornbury Grandview). We wanted to know everything we could so we could pass this information on to our customers. Information regarding how the product got to market, quality issues such as sizing, volume throughput, freezing time and packaging, were just some of the questions we had.

for hundreds of years. Now, local restaurants, caterers and hotels also enjoy the benefits of working with Canada's truly wild and naturally raised Arctic muskox.

Our past experiences selling muskox, coupled with the very positive feedback we have received on the flavour and culinary possibilities, prompted us to negotiate a contract, along with our Eastern muskox sales partner, the Inuit and their representatives, to sell the meat from this year's harvest.



*Mark Hills stands in front of the herd of muskox beside the abattoir. It was 25 below zero and cold enough to act as a "natural" blast freezer.*

As far back as the late 50s, there were approximately 100 muskox on Banks Island. Today, due to the federal government's fish and wildlife conservation efforts, there are now approximately 95,000 head on Banks Island alone. Local wildlife experts believe the island would comfortably support closer to 45,000 to allow a balanced, healthy environment for the muskox and other wildlife. With this thought in mind, we decided to join in the hunt recently scheduled by the peoples of Sachs Harbour, Banks Island in the Northwest Territories.

Leaving from Vancouver, one must overnight in Edmonton and then fly to Inuvik (with stops in Yellowknife and Norman Wells on the way). The actual flying time is six hours. From Inuvik we fly out and over the Beaufort Sea in a light plane to the small community of Sachs Harbour on the southern edge of Banks Island. The population there is approximately 120. There are a few scattered houses on the southern shore above the 'banks' of Banks Island. Apart from the air strip and the portable abattoir there is nothing but open land covered by snow as far as the eye can see. When I landed it was 25 below zero before calculating the wind chill factor.

Settling in to the bed and breakfast (we called it the barracks), I was soon taken to the abattoir which was a line of tents covering a metal structure supporting rails to handle the carcasses for dressing and inspection by the Agriculture Canada inspection team and their veterinarians.

When you consider the conditions we were working under, it all seems quite amazing. We were very impressed with the professional handling of all aspects of this very unique program. What was really special was the way local government and the local community worked together with us to make it happen. The Inuit of Sachs Harbour are very much a part of the day to day decision making process, and they make the last call on any issues relative to their people and their muskox.

The harvesters were a great bunch. Usually there's five or six to a team, and in our case, there were two teams. Listening to them speak about their task, it was reminiscent of the old west, except they were rounding up the muskox on snowmobiles instead of horses. Planning to venture out again, they explained they were going "out on the land" which they quite literally did. It would take as long as 10 days to round up a few hundred head from the northern region of the island and slowly move them down to the special temporary corrals constructed for the harvest.

Back in Vancouver, excited more than ever about selling this wonderful natural protein to Canadians, as well as export markets, it is satisfying to know that in the tiny community of Sachs Harbour there are many people wishing us much success in our efforts. Their community has new employment, the muskox herd is receiving the culling wildlife experts deem healthy, and gourmets, chefs, restaurateurs, and those who desire natural, organic, flavourful protein are being satisfied.