

THE RAMBOUILLET MERINO

France's Flock : european heritage

This flock has been introduced in France in 1786 by Louis XVI in the farm dedicated to agronomy experimentation and acclimation of new breeds and of new seeds from all over the world.

Rambouillet Merinos have been bred at the Bergerie Nationale for 225 years. The original flock consisted of 366 (318 ewes, 42 rams and 6 sheep) which after leaving Segovia on may 1786, arrived at Rambouillet (out of 383 which left Spain) on 12th October. They had accomplished a five months journey.

The animals were housed in barns since there was no sheep building for them until the following year. The size of the flock was increased slightly by another importation from Spain in 1801, but this had little effect on the quality of the flock. Since then no other breeding stock has been introduced. Every endeavour has been made to keep the flock pure. Breeding has been carefully planned to avoid inbreeding as the result of the small number (only ten), of original families.

The royal flock for Rambouillet consisted mainly of animals taken from best Spanish rearings : Perales (58), Perella (50), Paular (48), Negressi (42), Escorial (41), Alcola (37), San Juan (37), Portago (33) and two much smaller : Irunda (20) and Salazar (17).

The efforts to avoid bad effects added to a drastic selection were successful. The Rambouillet Merino had been born equal in every way to the original strains.

At the Bergerie Nationale, the flock grew in size ; 320 to 350 females were mated annually. This enabled rams to be given to neighbouring farmers, but as they were not particularly interested, annual auction sales were started. These were attended by many French and foreign buyers with the result that Rambouillet Merinos gradually established in France and throughout the world, either as pure or crossbreds.

The goal to be reached by these Merino, chosen among the best merino sires and ewes in Spain at that time, was to improve French wool industry. The quality of the shepherds' work during the following years and specially in the 19th century ranked this flock at the first place in Europe. The Bergerie Nationale exported a lot of rams to everywhere in the world.

In the 19th century, several hundred heads were being exported annually to the following countries : Australia (from 1863 to 1896) ; U.S.A (California and Texas) ; Argentina ; Uruguay ; Peru ; South Africa ; North Africa ; Russia ; Italy, Poland Switzerland, Rumania, Portugal, and even Spain...

Fewer sheep were exported during the first half of the 20th century but Rambouillet Merinos were bought by new countries among which were Columbia, Ecuador, Venezuela, Mexico, Chile, Hungary, Yugoslavia and Morocco.

Today, some of the best Merino breeds in the world are issued from crossing with Rambouillet in the 19th century. After having let their precious Merinos going out towards different countries, the Spanish lost the original breed by crossings.

The small number of sheep in the Bergerie Nationale flock (130 ewes and 25 rams) is an actual danger of total dying out in case of fire or diseases on the site or as blister fever in United Kingdom in 2001.

Breed standard

Rambouillet Merinos have slightly hooked noses, often with some folds of skins. They are completely covered with wool. Only the rams have horns ; these are uniformly coiled.

Rams stand 70 to 75 cm at the withers and weigh 70 to 80 kg. Ewes are 60 to 64 cm at the withers and weigh 45 to 50 kg.

Wool

The very thick fleece of the Rambouillet Merino consists of square staple wool covering the whole body and amounting to 8 to 10 % of the live weight of an adult animal (4 to 5 kg in ewes and 5 to 8 kg in rams)

The staple is white, but sometimes butter coloured, very curly, 6-7 cm long with average fineness of 110 -120 (18-20 μ), but up to 140 (16-17 μ). Staple length, fineness, elasticity and strength are uniform. Fleeces contain 5000 strands per cm².

Utilization

The Rambouillet Merino is the ideal fine wool sheep. It is a very hardy animal, adapts easily to all climates, including dry conditions and can be used in all systems. Amongst other attributes it will live off natural vegetation.

Today, unique flock of sheep of this pure breed remaining in the world it has 130 ewes and 25 rams. Lambing takes place indoors in the autumn after the flock has spent 6 months on grass. Out of season lambing, one of the features of the Rambouillet Merino is a great asset since it enables lambs to be produced indoors out of season.

Breeding and conservation of this rare breed

The breeding program for this breed with small numbers was based on the principle that "mating must not take place between animals with a common ancestor within the last 4 generations". Research into ancestry and the checking of relationships are now computerized by the National institute for agronomy research (INRA).

The flock is kept by controlled inbreeding. (about 60 %). Since many years the scientific following up has been discontinued, however this flock is a real gene pool for other Merino breeds.

This flock is a scientific curiosity. It has been participating to scientific researches and is still a support for comparison studies. It has been participating to the CRYOSITU research project of the french national institute for agronomy (INRA) , from june 2007 to june 2009 :

Analyse et optimisation de la complémentarité entre la cryobanque nationale et les dispositifs de gestion in situ des populations animales.

The merino flock is conserved *in situ* at the Bergerie Nationale in Rambouillet. The inbreeding conservation methodology is recognized and mentioned in the French National Chart for the management of genetic resources.

The conservation *ex situ* is under the responsibility of the national cryobank associated with the national institute for agronomy (INRA) which realizes embryo collection.

The flock has no economical profitability today. However we are persuaded that this little flock is "able to earn its living" and we think that biodiversity in agriculture offering diversification and new opportunities in a changing world may help to produce an income. Moreover, this original breed may have interesting aspects for sustainable and organic farming.

Although the Rambouillet Merino breed is only represented by a small number of sheep today, one must not forget the very important role the breed played in the past in the creation and improvement of other sheep breeds throughout the world and that Rambouillet sheep are the only witnesses of a disappeared world.

The Rambouillet in the world

The Rambouillet merino in Australia

The Peppin brothers imported 4 Rambouillet rams in 1860. One of these, "Emperor," cut a 11.4 kg (5.1 kg clean) fleece. Emperor is still considered as one of the more significant genetic improvement in Australian breeding. "Emperor" was at the origin of the PEPPIN breeding in Australia and the procreator of a line which represents still 70 % of the australian Merino today.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peppin_Merino

There is an american Rambouillet in the USA...

<http://www.countrylovin.com/ARSBA/index.htm>