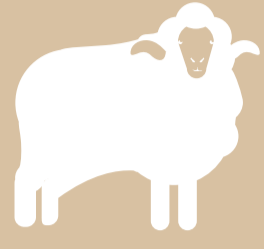




Merino

i MERINO FAST FACTS



NZ's First Sheep 1773

National numbers: 2 million sheep

Breed Characteristics

Weight: ewes 50 - 5kg | Rams 65 -100 kg



Lambing % 80 - 110 %

Wool: Particularly fine, thick and bulky



FINE comb merino | 12 micron



MEDIUM comb Merino | 16 micron



COURSE comb Merino | 20 micron



Staple length | 65 - 100mm



Fleece Weight | Range 4 - 6kg

Used in quality wool and worsted fabrics

Meat: Fine grained, very tender & lean

The ancient breed of Merino comes from Spain, though some argue its true origins lie in Africa. 'Ovegas Merino', which means "travelling sheep" are a fine-boned, medium-sized breed with a pronounced neck and shoulder folds. They are able to withstand drought and are a hardy and active forager. Merino wool is fine and of the highest quality. In Spain, the industry was so valuable the penalty for exporting the sheep was death. Fortunately, the disruption caused by the Napoleonic wars allowed the spread of the Merinos throughout Europe, North America and Australasia.

Captain Cook introduced New Zealand's first two sheep, which were Merinos, in 1773 but these animals did not survive. The first breeding stock was introduced to Mana Island in Cook Strait in 1834. However it was not until the 1840's that the first significant numbers of Merino were imported from Australia where their own sheep industry was largely based on Merinos. However these were found to be of fairly poor quality. Small numbers of Merinos were brought from Europe and the US to help improve stock, in turn creating a distinct 'New Zealand Merino' type by the late 1900's.

In Central Otago, the Shennan Brothers are said to be responsible for introducing the first Merino

sheep in the mid 1800's. Initially their stock came from Australia but they were left disappointed with the quality of wool after the first shearing. The brothers travelled to Germany and secured some of the highest quality sheep for their flocks from the King of Prussia. The Merinos did not perform well in the wetter areas of New Zealand and were prone to footrot but the breed flourished in Central Otago and helped to firmly establish the area.

Merino Wool is some of the finest in the world ranging from an average of 19 microns to as low as 12. New Zealand wool was largely exported to Britain throughout the 19th century where it was made into clothing and other wool products like carpets.

Unfortunately new processing techniques in Britain could only handle longer and stronger wool so export demands began decreasing from the 1870's.

With the land stocked to capacity in Central Otago and throughout New Zealand, the only commercial outlet was to boil down surplus sheep for tallow, a type of fuel that could be burned for light. Merinos were not profitable in this because they are so lean and farmers began diversifying their flocks. The drop in wool prices and then the development of refrigerated shipping in 1882 continued this trend.

Demand for meat breeds increased and the Merino was gradually replaced on the lowlands and in the wetter areas by dual-purpose breeds such as the Border Leicester, English Leicester, Lincoln and Romney. Farmers trying to get the best of both worlds, wool and meat, bred Merinos with meatier breeds and produced the Halfbred and the Corriedale.

These days the Merino is mainly confined to the drier, mountainous and high plateau areas, like Central Otago and the Canterbury plains. Merino has become synonymous with high quality clothing that is light yet warm. Thusly, it continues to be bred mainly for its wool but recent times have seen a growing appreciation for the fine-grained and largely fat-free meat of the breed. It still ranks as the fifth most popular breed in the country with over 3 million around New Zealand.

The Merino remains the most common breed in Central Otago. Some of the best stud farms are based in Central with wool, rams and ewes being exported around the world to places like Argentina, Uruguay and UK. The farming and wool industry provides the backbone of the district and the importance of the Merino in helping to establish Central Otago is undeniable neither is the special place the Merino continues to hold.

