

The Sheep



Horns vary in size and number and shape. Some rams have four horns, Many rams have two, often curled. Ewes have two "spikes"; some have no horns.

The Wool

The wool's natural color varies from black, brown and tan to white. Indigo dye produces a deep blue. Churros produce a tough wool and good mutton.

Churro History

Disdained in colonial Spain as a rough, semi-wild, unrefined sheep, the *churra* (now locally *churro*) were shipped off with explorers and colonists bound for New Spain. They moved into New Mexico with several *entradas*:

- 1540 – Coronado (food supply)
- 1581 – Rodríguez (food supply)
- 1598 – Oñate took 4,000 to S.Juan.

1680 – Pueblo Revolt sharply decreased sheep numbers. Navajo and Pueblos started new flocks.

1697 – Vargas brought churros from Spain for families returning to NM.

1800s– Pres. Santa Anna imported Spanish and Saxon “upgrades”.

1860-1900s–U.S. reduced churros hoping to “upgrade” Indian and Hispanic sheep production

In the 18th and early 19th centuries, much of the trade with Mexico was for mutton—driving the sheep to the consumer.

Zebulon Pike in 1807, near Socorro, wrote: *Passed the encampment of the caravan going out [South] with about 15,000 sheep... 300 men...and 35 or 40 troops.* They went into Mexico, traded the sheep for merchandise, and returned—a 2-month round trip.

In 1829, the Old Spanish Trail provided a new outlet for sale of *finished* woolen goods, supporting home industry.

For a couple of centuries, fine-wool Merino sheep, had stayed in Spain; the crown prohibited their export. When brought to NM, the merino lacked the rusticity of the churro for the arid climate and rough vegetation.

Recent restorations of the “Navajo-Churro” breed are paying dividends.

Old Spanish Trail Profiles

CHURRO

America's First Domestic Sheep



Churro sheep supplied the raw material of northern New Mexico's trade goods for the Old Spanish Trail.

Old Spanish Trail Association
www.oldspanishtrail.org

Endearing Qualities

What Southwest herders like about churro sheep:

1. Double fleece with inner and outer coats, with fibers of various diameters keep the sheep warm in mile-high winters. It makes a textile tough enough for blankets and rugs.
2. Nearly straight, strong fibers (no crimp) make weaving easy and yield well insulated blankets.
3. The long upper body fleece sheds rain and snow. The short belly hair allows them to lie down without soaking up lots of moisture and gives lambs easy access to the ewe's milk.
4. The ewes are good mothers, often caring for twins and triplets.
5. The animals are alert, quick to react defensively to strange movements, and very nimble.
6. The band tends to stay together. Turn them loose at 9:30-10 a.m. They graze, then usually come home on their own by dusk.
7. Highly disease resistant animals mean high survival rates and low costs of medication.
8. Churros survived long drives on the trail even through arid country. In colonial days, they drove from Santa Fe to Chihuahua and south. New Mexico churros also walked clear to Sacramento, CA, to become food for gold miners in the 1850s.
9. The tasty, lean meat has superior mild flavor and tenderness.



Along the Old Spanish Trail, you may be able to see Churro sheep (in season) at several locations:

- Near Tierra Amarilla, NM; ask at Tierra Wools.
- Near Ojo Caliente, NM, call Cerro Mojino.
- Near Manassa, CO call Marvin Muñiz (breeder of sheep in photos).
- Near Durango, CO, call RNJ Ranch, Dyer's Wools in Hesperus, or Chris Ribera near Arboles.
- On the Navajo Nation; ask in Kayenta, AZ
- In UT, check with Cunningham Farms near Moab
- In AZ, go to Bear Park Farm near Williams
- In CA, six or more breeders work in the Central Valley.

After the 1680 Pueblo Revolt and the return of Spanish settlers to New Mexico, the numbers of sheep grew rapidly in the 1700s. Mutton on the hoof and wool products became important exports into Mexico. By 1750, sheep ranching became New Mexico's most important industry. Governors of the region had some of the largest flocks and were the biggest sheep traders.

The productivity of Navajo, Pueblo, and Spanish weavers led to annual mule caravans to southern California from 1829-1848, where two churro blankets would buy a horse or mule.



Old Spanish Trail Association and its 40+ Trail Partners scattered across six states offer exhibits, visitor experiences, and information about this National Historic Trail. Some exhibit Rio Grande textiles. For more information, see: www.oldspanishtrail.org and www.navajo-churrosheep.com.