



Production Area

United States

Colorado Plateau Region, encompassing the four corners area of Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado and Utah

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Slow Food **Presidia** are local projects that work to improve the infrastructure of artisan food production. The goal of the Presidia is to guarantee a viable future for traditional foods by stabilizing production techniques, establishing stringent production standards, and promoting local consumption. The Presidia project is coordinated by the Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity, which organizes and funds projects that defend our world's heritage of agricultural biodiversity and gastronomic traditions.

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www.slowfoodfoundation.com


Slow Food®

Navajo-Churro Sheep



Slow Food Foundation
for Biodiversity

The Oldest Breed of Sheep In North America

The hardy churra sheep breed—with its multi-colored double fleece—was brought by the Spaniards to Mexico by 1540, and reached overland to northern New Mexico by 1598. Over four hundred years, this multi-purpose breed has adapted to the arid conditions of the sagebrush steppe and pinyon-juniper pygmy woodlands of the mesas, buttes and desert canyons of New Mexico, Arizona, Utah and Colorado. Now called the Navajo-Churro sheep, its carpet-quality wool has been used by Hispanic, Diné (Navajo) and Pueblo Indian weavers to produce world-renowned rugs, saddle blankets, coats and vests. Relying on native forage of the canyon country of the Colorado Plateau, the sheep also provided "sage-fed" lamb and mutton, central to their sustenance as well as religious ceremonies. However the value of the breed was not recognized by government range managers whose stock reduction programs in the mid-



1800s, and again in the 1930s, reduced the number of breeding individuals of Navajo-Churro sheep to less than four hundred. Then, in the 1980s, a number of grassroots organizations joined forces to recover the breed and its unique products. By 2005, the Navajo-Churro Sheep Association had registered more than 5000 individuals, and for the first time ever, the lamb is now featured every day of the year in regional restaurants. Navajo-Churro lambs produced in canyon country are range-fed, antibiotic-free, and parasite-free. Because the fat of this breed is typically concentrated around the organs rather than being spread throughout the body, even the meat from animals reaching fourteen to sixteen months of age does not suffer from the musky, "muttony" smell that afflicts other breeds. Instead, it retains a light, herbal fragrance and a complex, grassy flavor. The meat is highly valued by both traditional cooks and celebrity chefs.

The Presidium

In the summer of 2006, several non-profit organizations joined forces with Slow Food USA to establish a Presidium to promote the recovery of Navajo-Churro lamb and to foster its sustainable production. The Navajo-Churro Sheep Presidium was organized to initially benefit a loose collective of Diné sheepherders, meat producers, hand-spinners and weavers, who live on western and northern "chapters" of the Navajo Indian reservation. The project will help develop direct-marketing strategies within the region, particularly targeting chefs and caterers who are interested in using the whole carcass. The Presidium was initially formed through the collaboration of Slow Food USA with Diné Be'łina, the Navajo Churro Sheep Association, American Livestock Breeds Conservancy, the Center for Sustainable Environments, and Renewing America's Food Traditions. The Alta Arizona Slow Food Convivium, the Institute for Integrated Rural Development at Diné College, the Navajo Sheep Project, and Heifer International have also played important supporting roles. It is hoped that once the model for direct marketing of Navajo-Churro lamb is seen to benefit those in Western Navajo lands, a similar effort will be developed between Eastern Navajo and Hispanic lands in New Mexico.

