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# NORTH VALLEY FARMS CHÈVRE

## STORIES FROM THE GOATHERD

BY CANDACE BYRNE

### I

One day last summer at North Valley Farms, the agitator motor went out on the antique pasteurizer, a machine that looks like an old, white-enameled, top-loading washer. Deneane and Mark Ashcraft use a pasteurization process known as “heat-treated,” which keeps the milk at a low temperature for a long time and which maintains the flavor of the milk better than a high-temperature, short duration treatment. The heat source lies in a sleeve around a stainless steel tank, and the agitator keeps the milk moving gently to maintain a constant temperature of 142 degrees throughout. Without the agitator motor, the pasteurization process halts, and, since their milk is pasteurized before it is made into cheese, cheese making also halts.

The Ashcrafts’ 29 milk goats didn’t care about the agitator

motor. In summer’s peak production time, each goat produces more than two gallons/day whether or not the pasteurizer operates. Deneane and her right hand, Toni Rehdorf, did care. Each day without the motor meant sixty gallons of goat milk wasted. When the motor first failed, they joked about switching occupations: sell Avon; avoid the vagaries of farming. Then Deneane found a repair shop in Red Bluff, where the owner was convinced he could repair the 67-year old motor. The motor went to Red Bluff, and Toni and Deneane dumped gallons of milk into the compost. However, one day became two, two became three, three turned to four, and the mechanic was stymied by the motor; he could neither order nor make the necessary parts.

Four days without the motor, their Avon joke had lost its punch, and dumping milk had become more and more discouraging. Deneane and Mark made the decision to

order a new agitator at considerable cost, but delivery and installation were some days out.

Then the phone rang. The judges at the California State Fair commercial cheese competition had awarded a gold medal to North Valley Farms’ hand-crafted goat cheese flavored with herbs de Provence. First year of production, first entry into California State Fair, first gold medal. Now *there* was encouragement. And darn good timing.

### II

Both Deneane and Mark come from farm families, with roots in dairy cow and beef cattle production, so they are no strangers to farm work. Although





2007 was the North Valley Farm's first year of commercial cheese production, Deneane and Mark have been breeding and raising quality goats for seventeen years. Indeed, their operation has produced award-winning Toggenburg, LaMancha, and Saanen goats. Toggenburgs are Swiss in origin, a brown goat often with wattles growing at their necks. LaManchas were developed in Oregon, a goat with tiny or no ears. Saanen are another Swiss breed, a white goat with small, forward ears. All have a reputation as good milkers, but, of course, individuals vary, and that's where breeding comes in.

Dairy goat judging relates form to function: the same animal characteristics that produce good milk and milkers translate into awards. For example, their Toggenburgs have won Senior Champion and Supreme Champion awards for their udders in both the Toggenburg class and among all dairy goats in the LA County Fair. Dairy farmers can also volunteer their animals for a continuous improvement testing called Dairy Herd Improvement Records, which measure milk production and, of that milk, percent butterfat and percent protein. Stellar results in DHIR can earn a doe a place on the Top Ten list for best milk production. Does of North Valley Farm have earned such recognition.

Over the years, Deneane has developed a closed herd—goats are born on the farm in Cottonwood and hand-raised there. This strategy commits her to a quality herd, without introducing inferior animals or their diseases. “We want them to be a really good doe,” Deneane says. “They have to be a good kid.”

### III

Phade to Brown, Phable. Squirrel, Pink Squirrel, Super Squirrel. Eeyore, Hairy, Anna Nicole, and Olivia. Chamois and Snake Face, Mimosa and Mint Julep. Red Rider, Spanish Moss, Pet. For each milking, Deneane and Toni call the does by name to herd them to the milk parlor's holding area. There, the does line up twice a day in the same order and move into the milking parlor, each to her own stall. Two shifts accommodate the thirty does, and the second shift waits patiently in the holding area, lined up in stall order, until the first shift finishes milking. Everyone, Deneane and Toni included, is all business. It's only 48 hours from milking to cheese.

### IV

North Valley Farms uses a circular milking system in its creamery. That means a hands-free movement of the milk from the does to the bulk tank pasteurizer and easy sanitizing of the lines that transport it. Once the milk is pasteurized, a vegetable rennet is added, and the milk curds form. The curds are transferred by hand into cheesecloth bags and round, slotted molds, which are hung or placed on racks, where gravity drips the excess whey out of the cheese. Within those 48 hours, Deneane and Toni produce four and a half and seven and a half ounce rounds of fresh goat cheese for customers and larger rounds for chefs. Deneane remembers having read that the process is “the act of controlled spoilage,” and she and Toni lend observant and caring control.

Responding to a market demand for fresh chèvre, Deneane first produced plain soft cheese rounds. Fresh chèvre is sometimes likened to cream cheese made from cow's milk, but it is a lighter, fluffier cheese, with one-third the calorie and fat content. In some quarters, goat cheese has a reputation for a raunchy taste, but North Valley Farms chèvre customers always remark on its milky, sweet flavor and enjoy it in both savory and sweet recipes. The sweetness is attributed to the goats' happy lifetime in Cottonwood, tended with care and surrounded by food and friends. For the savory, Deneane and Toni also roll the rounds in various herbs and spices, some in dill, others in onion and peppercorns, garlic and chives, rosemary and thyme, and the signature herbs de Provence.

A grade A dairy, North Valley Farms is frequently monitored by state inspectors. The milking parlor is scored every six months, and the cheese processing room quarterly. In addition, the milk from each goat is tested monthly. This monitoring ensures bacteria-, coliform-, antibiotic- and hormone-free milk. In their office in the creamery, the Ashcrafts proudly display printouts that detail the farm's scores. “Our goal is good product, all the time,” says Deneane. The monitoring helps assure the goal, and the caring, observant control assures the taste.

### V

North Valley Farms' goats produce milk ten months of the year. The other two months are devoted to kidding, a time



when, Deneane says, “The goats are in charge. I’m just the tender.” Most of the kids are born in March, a few in April, which means a springtime of often sleepless nights and long days tending the births. By a month old, the dozens of kids are eating alfalfa and admitted into the Ashcraft’s backyard area, where they are not above leaping onto the laps of those sitting around the patio table.

From May, when the kids are weaned, until August, each doe produces two gallons and more per day, decreasing production through the fall to a gallon of milk per day by December. At North Valley Farms, the milk begins as pasture grass, alfalfa, weeds from dry pasture, and occasional treats of peanuts. Goats are natural browsers who like variety in their diet. These goats have access to food 24/7, and they choose between grazing in the pasture, browsing its edges, and eating in an open, enclosed area where dry grass is always available.

Peter Dixon, a cheese consultant who lives in Vermont, says goat milk derives half its flavor from the diet of the goats, and the sweetest flavor results from a combination of grazing and browsing, as at North Valley Farms. Feeding grain results in higher milk production, but less sweetness. Dixon attributes the rest of the flavor of a herd’s milk to many factors: the milking environment, the environment of the cave or area where the cheese is aged, the cultures used in curdling the milk, even the personality of the milkers. Goats are communal creatures, who form attachments for life with their pals in the goatherd; Deneane and Toni even observe them in “gang fights,” quick squabbles that devolve into playing or eating. These goats also clearly relate to their milkers. When Deneane and Toni join them in the pasture, the goats revert to a favorite pastime of their youth: bumping up to nuzzle the humans.

## VI

From the beginning, maybe because of their family roots in farming, the Ashcrafts have had a European model in mind.

A family pastures animals that have been born on the farm and hand-raised. They produce cheese in small batches. They kibitz with other artisan cheese makers. Word of mouth carries the quality of their cheeses.

Some aspects of this model are incongruent with U.S. practices. In the U.S. the Department of Agriculture provides oversight. In California, the California Milk and Dairy Food Control Board administers the federal regulations, beginning with the construction of the creamery. Mark and Deneane say, “We did what they said and saw value to it—which we realized once we started to work in the plant.” With the semi-annual, quarterly, and monthly inspections of all aspects of the operation, the farm is much more regulated than a European farm. U.S. regulations result in a standardized process, although, comments Deneane, “You can’t standardize the milk,” the quality of which is determined by the quality of their goats’ feed and life.

Congruent with the European model, Deneane and Toni work with small batches, and they consult with other artisan cheese makers. Deneane has consulted with Jennifer Bice, cheesemaker at Redwood Hill Farm in Sebastopol, who makes and sells five varieties of goat cheese, and with the Mattos family, a Portuguese family, who, although they work with dairy cows, produce a fine, aged cheese. She also works with Jim and Gayle Tanner, of Bonnie Blue Farm in Tennessee, whom she knew as fellow California “goaties” before they moved from California and who, in Tennessee, have won numerous awards for their goat cheeses.

This past winter, as her goats stopped producing milk in preparation for giving birth, Deneane traveled to Tennessee, where she and the Tanners spent a few days under Peter Dixon’s tutelage. This year, North Valley Farms will expand the varieties of cheese it offers. Deneane plans to make a feta cheese, which will be available packed in brine or in an herbed olive oil. She’s also readied a cheese cave—an old (uh, oh) freezer, where she will age a rinded goat cheese called tome,

which, over the course of a few months, will develop flavors ranging from mild to tangy and sharp. Tome, according to Dixon, is a simple, ancient cheese, which originates in the Pyrenees and Alps. In the summer, when herds grazed high in the mountains, large batches of milk were collected from the whole herd, then the cheese aged over winter there in mountain caves. When snow brought the herds back down to the villages, the goats each returned to the families who owned them, and the families made small batches and aged them at home—thus the name tome.

Beyond this year? Well, Deneane is curious what will happen to the cheese if the does occasionally eat fresh herbs. Dixon points out that the butterfat in milk carries the flavor of the cheese; he suspects that oils from the plants the goats eat get synthesized into the fats in the milk. Deneane, as the Tender, may have a chance to test this out.

Interested readers can visit the farm's website at [www.northvalleyfarms.com](http://www.northvalleyfarms.com). Mark and Deneane can be found at the Redding and Chico Farmers' Markets, where you can sample their cheeses. The cheese is also available at Kent's Meats and Groceries and Orchard Nutrition Center in Redding and at Chico Natural Foods and Zucchini and Vine in Chico.



## Burnsini Vineyards

*Merlot*

*Cabernet*

*Zinfandel*

*Petite Sirah*

*Tehama Red*



*Tastings by appointment*

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