



Goat cheese anyone? Local farm finds plenty of demand for its product

by Laura Camper/Times-Georgian

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Since he was 10 years old, Mark Stevens has been raising goats, so when he was laid off in July 2008 it seemed the perfect time to turn his hobby into a business.

Stevens rounded up two partners, his roommate, Daniel Young, and Earl Morehead, both with an abundance of experience in goat farming, and the three decided to take the plunge into entrepreneurship.

“It was look for a job, or goats, you know. We decided it was the exact right time,” Stevens said. “So, we pooled all our resources and invested every bit of money we had.”

Stevens has lived on Cole’s Lake Road in Carrollton for about three years and had plenty of room for the barn and cheese kitchen. So, he designed the building and they started construction. They applied for and received their Grade A dairy license to produce milk as well as a plant license to produce cheese from the United States Department of Agriculture, and have been in business since May 2009.



The three all have different roles in the business. Stevens handles cheese making and marketing. Young maintains the herd and helps with milking. Morehead fills in the gaps; he keeps track of purchasing feed, inventories of food and supplements and whatever else needs to be done.

Right now, they are milking about 30 of their goats. By spring, after the next wave of babies are born, Stevens figures they’ll be milking about 100. Stevens and his partners have stopped selling goat milk shortly after they started to use every bit of it for cheese production. The demand for the cheese was so strong they have a back order list. They sell at several farmers’ markets including the Carrollton market on Saturdays and the Ashley Park market in Newnan.

He also sells to some exclusive restaurants in Atlanta, including Canoe, WaterHaven Restaurant and Star Provisions of Bacchanalia. Miller’s on the Square in Carrollton sells the cheese in an exclusive agreement with the dairy.

The goat farm sells out of cheese every day and is doing so well the partners plan to expand their operation this spring. They will double the size of the cheese kitchen and add a second pasteurizer. At that point they will be producing about 200 pounds of cheese a day.

Making cheese is a three-day process. The milk has to be pasteurized and then cultured. Then the milk is allowed to separate, until it has “the right feel,” a process that takes hours but how many depends on the type of cheese Stevens is making. Once the cheese is at the right consistency it’s hung to dry for 12 to 18 hours and then it can be flavored and molded. After it is aged another 12 hours, it is finally ready for sale.



Goat farming is a busy life. Stevens gets up every morning about 6 a.m. to feed and milk the goats. He makes cheese until about 2 p.m. and then heads to the farmers' markets to sell the cheese. He arrives home about 8 p.m., just in time for another milking. After cleaning up, he usually gets to bed about midnight, Stevens said.

But he knew what he was getting into.

"My grandparents had dairy goats and we had always used the goat milk instead of cows' milk," Stevens said. "So, when I was about 10 years old they bought me my first herd."

Stevens has never not had goats and never not made cheese, he said.

He's shown goats on the national circuit since he was 10, and has learned to recognize the characteristics of a good producer. Young, a licensed judge with the American Dairy Goat Association, is also well versed in how to pick a good goat. Their combined knowledge has led to a herd of about 100 outstanding goats, some born as far away as Washington state. And good goats are what make a good goat cheese.

"What makes our cheese so good is our goats are so well taken care of," Stevens said. "The happiness of our animals, that's our number one goal. It is so true what the commercial says – happy cows make good milk, happy goats make good cheese."

They feed the goats three kinds of hay – Midwestern alfalfa, peanut hay and local grass hay. The hay is placed in several different places in the fields so the goats can find it.

"They are forage animals and they like to look for their hay," Stevens said, pointing out some of the feeders in the field. "We let them pick and choose what they want to eat."

The animals will instinctively eat what they need to balance their diet, the same way a person might crave a specific food when they are low on a vitamin or mineral in their diet.

The goats all live together in the barn. Unlike horses that have their own stalls, the goats all sleep together in several large stalls. They're social animals and don't like to be alone, Stevens said. As if to prove his point, when he climbs over the fence into the field where the milking goats are feeding, they trot over to him in a group and crowd around him.

"It's like having dogs," Stevens said with a smile as they brush up against him for a quick pat.

The sound of bleating fills the field as he bends to pet the goats as they mill around his knees and, from the smile on his face, it's obvious that despite the hard work, he has found his dream career.

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