

FOR THE LOVE OF GOATS

An Interview at Mystery Bay Farm

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Imagine loving your two goats enough to move with them from Pescadero, California to Marrowstone Island, Washington, over 1,000 miles. That's exactly what Rachael Van Laanen and her husband, Scott Brinton, did in 2006. Scott grew up in Redwood City, California and Rachel is from Colorado. The Pacific Northwest, with its combination of mountains and ocean, was the only place these two "outdoor-adventurers-cum-farmers" could agree upon to relocate their farm when it became clear that California real estate prices would make it difficult for them to realize their dreams. They rented land in Nordland, which just happens to be the piece they now own, and created Mystery Bay Farm, a goat dairy where the couple and Cora Mae, their 16 month old daughter, now make Mystery Bay goat cheeses.

At my recent visit to the farm, we began my tour with the baby goats. After the family and I played with the baby goats that climbed up my back and sucked on my long hair, Scott and Rachael fed the goats. Scott then took Cora Mae into the house and I continued my interview with Rachael.

It is clear that Rachael is serious about her business; this is no hobby, but a labor of serious love. She gives credit to a number of people and organizations for helping them create Mystery Bay Farm. Working with Kathleen Purdy at the Washington State Small Business Development Center and taking WSU's Cultivating Success® sustainable farms education program helped her to create their business plan. The prior owners of the farm property were so impressed with Rachael and Scott's dream they agreed to sell them the land they were renting (which wasn't for sale). They also helped Scott and Rachael with their business plan and eventually helped build their barn. Rachael's engineer-dad helped design parts of the cheese-making operation, installing state-of-the-art LED lighting he fabricated specifically for the dairy.

I found myself drawn to ask this highly articulate mother, wife, sailor and goat dairy farmer, a graduate of University of California at Santa Cruz, what she did when she wasn't "goating." Rachael replied, "I think about goating! I plan new brush islands for the pasture and think about the business."

"I wanted to be a dairy farmer," Rachael told me. "Even though I loved vegetable farming [what she and Scott were doing in Pescadero], I LOVED the animal side of things. After we moved here, I got a job at Mt. Townsend Creamery, which was great, because I got the experience of working at a start-up business and I also learned to make cheese at a commercial operation." As I listened to Rachael, it became clear to me that this is a woman who approached her dream of dairy farming with intelligence and intention, important considerations in our current era of cheap food.

We discussed the difficulty of educating people about the relative value of goods sold by local farmers competing with multinational food corporations and we both acknowledged the challenge of making good quality food economically. Part of the work of farmers today is convincing buyers of the value of small-scale farm products, as well as the value of the rural economy they support when they buy from a farm like Mystery Bay. We also both agreed that the value of the work of farmers needs to gain equity with other professions.

“I don’t have a trust fund and I’m not getting rich,” Rachael confided. “I’m trying to be a diligent business person. I’m trying to create a viable business that supports the Marrowstone and greater-area local economy in an economically and socially sustainable manner while providing solid nourishment and supporting a small family with a modest living. I am passionate about (trying to create) farming that works financially. I have to operate this way to pay my loans.”

From what I could see, these farmers walk their talk. Although not certified organic, they feed the goats their own 100% mixed grass hay that has never been sprayed, apparently much in demand by other local farmers. They feed the goats 100% organic grain. “We manage our pastures so we have brush islands with roses, hawthorn and blackberry bushes for the goats to eat,” Rachael explained. “There’s an old wives tale that says goats eating blackberry bushes have sweeter milk.”

If the goats get sick, they are treated with an herbal medicine kit that veterinarian Jan Richards (who, according to Rachael, took a class in organic dairy techniques) showed Rachael how to use. On the windowsill of the squeaky clean milking shed were four items: a spray bottle of cider vinegar, a jar of pro-biotic powder, some organic molasses, and a bottle of garlic tablets. “That’s about all [the medicine] I ever give them,” said Rachael, referring to the goats. “I’ve only used antibiotics to treat my herd once, when one of the goats got an eye infection.”

Rachael’s herd’s current milk yields are lower than they might be because she’s decided to feed the goats a lower protein feed, but she feels they’ll be healthier and will have higher long-term production because of the lower protein in their diet. Currently Rachael is operating at half her intended long-term production level, milking seven goats, with a plan to grow to the ideal milking herd of 15. “It’s in my business plan,” says Rachael.

As we headed into the milking shed, Rachael realized her goats were still at pasture and called them in to be milked. “MooooooCheeeee, MoooooCheeee,” she yelled out the door. I asked her what she was saying, and Rachael laughed. “Mochi is the name of our matriarch. We joke that when I’m calling her in, I’m saying ‘More Cheese, More Cheese!’” Mochi is one of the goats that moved to Nordland with the family and was the first hooked up to the milking pump.

Rachael, who showed great care and economy-of-movement, milked four American Alpine goats in less than 20 minutes: Mochi, Sophia, Larch, and Locust. Then Maggie snuck in to eat some grain. Maggie was very pregnant and Rachael had me come over to feel her huge belly. I think I could feel a hoof.

To arrange a tour of the farm and get directions, you can call Rachael at 360-385-3309 or see tour details at www.mysterybayfarm.com. To support this community enterprise, make sure to try

some of Rachael's small-batch, handcrafted goat cheeses, available at The Food Co-op in the cheese section. Just look for the big LOCAL sign on the shelf next to these tiny bundles of deliciousness.