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GOAT LADIES OF CALIFORNIA

Pioneers of American cheesemaking

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Goat Ladies of California

The pioneering women who created American fresh goat cheese

BY ELIZABETH BLAND



JENNIFER LYNN BICE
OF REDWOOD HILL FARM AND CREAMERY

PHOTO COURTESY OF REDWOOD HILL FARM AND CREAMERY



MARY KEEHN
OF CYPRESS GROVE CHEVRE

PHOTO COURTESY OF CYPRESS GROVE CHEVRE

It's hard to imagine a time when goat cheese wasn't every cheese lover's darling and fresh goat cheese ubiquitous to every restaurant's menu, but not too long ago goat cheese was the bastion of the brave or taste-bud deprived. Imported from France, the typical chèvre arrived more often than not a stinking, overripe cheese that disappointed rather than pleased the palate.

It took three hardworking women starting three unique and unconnected businesses to change the perception as well as the reality of goat cheese. Not only did these three bring the joys of fresh goat cheese to America, but they also ultimately changed the face of American cheesemaking.

This is a story about women struggling in an industry that was not female-friendly in a time when great cheese was almost exclusively European in origin. Yes, there were great cheeses being made in the United States, but they were rare and usually underrated. This is a success story accomplished the old-fashioned way — through honesty, hard work with no guarantees, passion and perseverance. It's a story about the tremendous American work ethic we hear so little about.

Jennifer Lynn Bice and Mary Keehn, pictured above, are still pleasing the cheese world with their innovative products.. The third, the notoriously camera-shy Laura Chenel, is an intensely private person who has retired from cheesemaking to tend to her goat herd.

Lee Smith, publisher

It wasn't all that long ago that most Americans turned up their noses at goat cheese. In fact, "Yuck!" was a pretty common response. It may be that prior to the last two decades of the 20th century, U.S. consumers were just too unso-

phisticated and provincial to appreciate goat cheese imported from France, but it's far more likely that those French imports were, well, "yucky."

Back then, cheese from France was shipped by boat, adding untold weeks under who knows what conditions to

the "affinage." And you'd have to add even more time to get from the East Coast to the West. Fresh cheeses were certainly long past the point when fresh was an appropriate description. Many had developed the distinctive ammoniated taste and smell of a past-

FROM MOTHER TO DAUGHTER Meyenberg's Goat Milk Miracle

When it began 75 years ago, Jackson-Mitchell's Meyenberg Goat Milk Products offered a single product — evaporated goat milk as an alternative for babies sensitive to cow's milk — through a single distribution point — pharmacies. Today, Meyenberg fresh whole and lowfat goat milk are staples on supermarket shelves across the country. Goat milk is an excellent alternative for anyone with an allergy or sensitivity to cow milk or soy milk. Although the company's foray into goat cheese is very recent, its long history in commercial milk production makes it an important player in the development of the U.S. goat cheese movement.

Meyenberg is a third-generation family-owned business. At age 39, Carol Jackson, the wife of second-generation owner Robert Jackson, had a daughter who was allergic to all baby formulas then on the market. Since the company's *raison d'être* was an alternative to cow's milk, she didn't have to search far to find milk her baby could tolerate. Once she had experienced first-hand how important goat's milk was to mothers of allergic children, she became the driving force in moving the company forward. She traveled the country, visiting doctors and preaching the medicinal benefits of goat's milk.

In 1988 her daughter, Tracy Plante-Darrimon, gave birth to a son who

was also allergic to commercial baby formulas. "I was hooked on the importance of goat's milk and the need to appease a screaming child. That was when I was completely sold on the miracles of goat's milk," she says.

"I was working in marketing and public relations, so I accepted the opportunity to set up venues for my mother to preach her message to magazines, newspapers, on radio shows, television shows, and conference speaker opportunities. Advertising was completely out of the question," says Plante-Darrimon, "so it was a driving passion from mother and daughter to keep the message going."

In the 1990s the demand for healthful alternatives came to fruition. Suddenly, the Meyenberg product line expanded from a single product — evaporated goat's milk — to many other forms, including fresh goat milk. Its popularity was so sudden that it required several family members to maintain the company's growth. The year 2000 brought another "goat boom" and an interest in goat cheese. Today Meyenberg offers award-winning goat butter, five goat Jack cheeses, two aged goat Cheddars and two goat cream cheeses. CC

its-prime goat cheese. Yet magazines and food experts were telling us these cheeses were wonderful. A few Americans agreed — at least in public — but the vast majority of cheese lovers said no thanks.

Then something quite remarkable happened. A trio of women in California began raising goats and needed an outlet for the fresh milk the goats produced. These women started making fresh goat cheese — cheese that Americans could finally get when it really was fresh. And cheesemaking hasn't been the same since.

California is home to some of the nation's most highly esteemed fresh goat's milk cheeses, many of which would never have come to life without the determination and creativity of the three matriarchs: Laura Chenel of Laura Chenel's Chèvre, Jennifer Lynn Bice of Redwood Hill Farm and Creamery, and Mary Keehn of Cypress Grove Chevre. This triumvirate grew a grassroots movement into a world-acclaimed powerhouse and contributed greatly to the food world's eat-local phenomenon and the back-to-the-land movement. Each woman faced her own set of challenges along the way and created signature goat cheeses that would inspire generations of women cheesemakers to come.

in the beginning...

There were goats. There were women. There was a budding interest in sustainable farming — before it was fashionable. Because goats are relatively small animals, women could handle them fairly easily. Goat's milk first became popular in the 1960s and 1970s, a time when many people, both women and men, were gravitating to a more land-driven lifestyle; they were concerned for the health of their families and where their food came from. "It wasn't a statement then," says Cypress Grove's Keehn. "It was a lifestyle business. People are doing the same thing now, but it's almost a political statement."

While the goat industry seemed to pop up at the same time for all three women, it did so in different ways. Chenel was one of the first to produce chèvre commercially. She established her company, Laura Chenel's Chèvre,

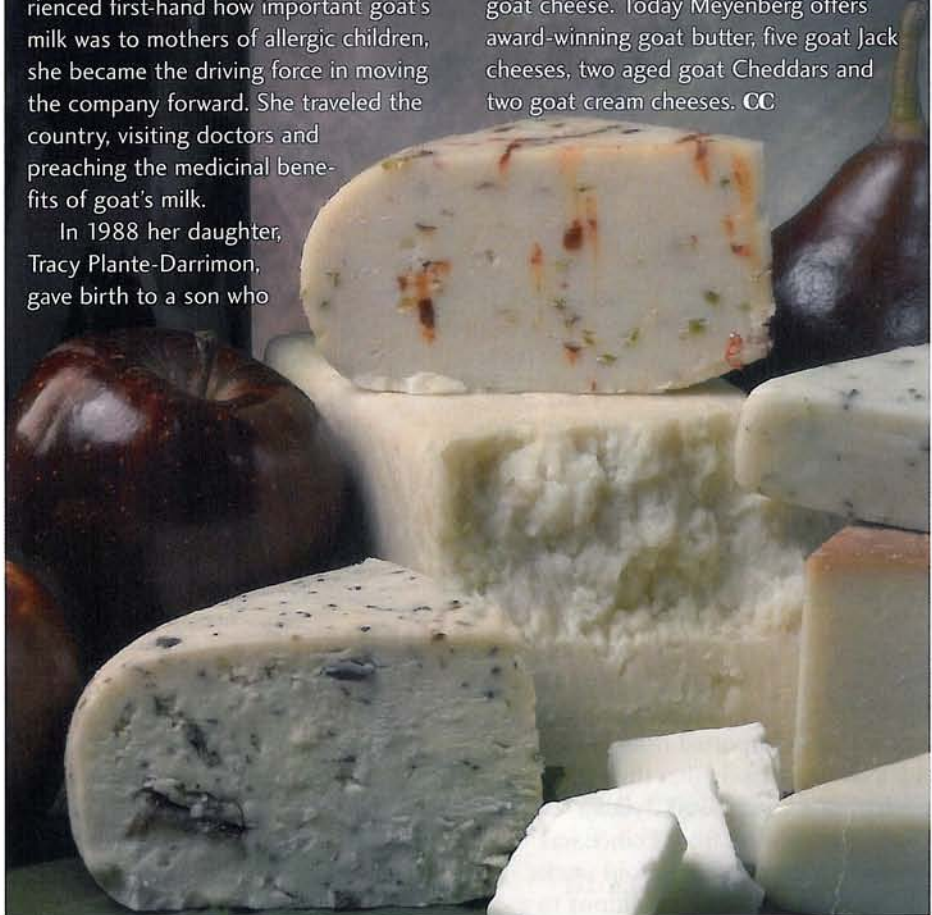


PHOTO COURTESY OF MEYENBERG GOAT PRODUCTS

in 1979 in Sonoma. Before delving into commercial endeavors, she lived on a farm that was home to a small herd of goats. Determined to make a French-style chèvre, she traveled to France to learn traditional chèvre techniques. Her garage served as the unlikely cheesemaking facility, and in spite of the unconventional set-up, the health department approved her program, allowing her to take her cheese to market.

An influential female chef and restaurateur, Alice Waters of Chez Panisse Restaurant in Berkeley, proved to be key in Chenel's success. Waters recognized the appeal and potential of fresh chèvre in the restaurant and immediately showed interest in Chenel's product. Her first order launched French-style chèvre — locally produced — into the fine-dining arena of California.

By the early 1980s, Chenel's chèvre was so popular she moved production to a creamery in Santa Rosa, selling her herd to focus more intently on cheesemaking. In the early 1990s, she acquired a new herd that included a rainbow of breeds, such as Alpine, Nubian, Saanen, and Toggenburg, so she could monitor the health of the goats and the quality of the milk. She also relocated to a creamery in Sonoma.

She expanded her repertoire beyond basic chèvre, making an array of classic French-style cheeses — but with a California twist — such as Chabis coated in herbs or pepper, Crottin with a bloomy rind, Cabécou medallions marinated in olive oil and herbs, and Taupinière, an ash-coated goat round with a bloomy rind. In spite of her diverse portfolio, her mainstay remained her plain chèvre, aptly named Chef's Chèvre, a staple in many

fine kitchens.

Chenel was never happy in the limelight and sold her operation to a French goat cheese company, the Rians Group, in 2006. Today the cheeses are still made according to Chenel's original recipes, and although Chenel is retired from the cheesemaking business, she supplies the company with milk from her herd of 500 goats.

The extra creamy Chef's Chèvre, an upscale goat cheese, remains Chenel's No. 1 item. It has transcended its starring role in salad and is now used in pizzas, entrées and even desserts, such as Strawberry Chèvre Cheesecake. That tangy goat cheese should find its way into an iconic American dessert is not really a surprise. Both chefs and home cooks are experimenting with goat cheese, adding condiments and other ingredients, such as fig marmalade and nuts, to the chèvre for an enticing blend of sweet, salty and tangy flavors.

who's on first?

Jennifer Bice of Redwood Hill may have started her cheese business later than her female colleagues, but she was the first to have goats. She began her journey as a 4-Her in the 1960s. "I was born in Los Angeles and had no contact with animals except cats, dogs and a turtle," she says. The family moved to Sonoma County in 1964, much to the dismay of Bice and her seven siblings. To appease the uprooted youngsters, her parents bought animals, including rabbits, sheep and chickens, as entertainment but the goats soon became her favorites. "Goats are really more like dogs in their personality. They can learn tricks. They learn their names. That's what got us hooked. That's when my parents decided to start the dairy."

Bice attributes women's attraction to goats — not just in California but all over the United States — to the higher IQ of the animals. "Women are more involved with goats than men are. The goats are more intelligent and more fun to be around [than other dairy animals]."

Although the family had little farming experience, they built a goat dairy in 1968 and Bice took on much of the responsibility for working with the fresh milk. Getting people to accept the idea of drinking goat's milk or eating goat cheese was a major hurdle. "When we first started, we would mention goat, they would start gagging or backing up," she says, laughing. "Now they say, 'Oh, we love goat cheese.' To see that happen in your own lifetime..."

In 1978 Bice and her partner Steven Schack bought Redwood Hill Farm from her parents and in 1986, they came out with a product that would become a signature item, goat's milk yogurt. Her timing could not have been more perfect. In 1988, there was a growing interest in both yogurt and goat cheese, so Redwood Hill launched a chèvre and the cheesemaking began. Among her current products are French-inspired chèvres, a soft-ripened round called Bucheret and another more aged, bloomy-rind cheese called Camelia, as well as a California Crottin. These signature cheeses pose a greater challenge than other products because of their short shelf life. "They're like a piece of fruit," she says.

She also works with raw milk and has created 2-month-old goat Feta and an aged Tomme de Chèvre, which she suggests serving with sparkling dry cider, Sauvignon Blanc or India pale ale.

Bice continues to innovate with her cultured goat products, one of which is

PHOTOS COURTESY OF REDWOOD HILL FARM AND CREAMERY



kefir, a probiotic, Middle Eastern-inspired beverage similar in taste and texture to drinkable yogurt. She describes it as mild, with a naturally sweet yet tangy flavor and a refreshing hint of natural carbonation. Made with easily digestible 100 percent grade A goat milk, it's fermented with 10 live and active kefir cultures. She urges people to be more adventurous and try other goat's milk products such as yogurt, kefir and even ice cream.

Bice's farm is known for its progressive farming and goat breeding. The breeds that provide milk for Redwood Hill Farm's cheeses are Alpine, LaMancha, Nubian, and Saanen, and according to Bice, each breed — and each individual animal — has its own personality. She balances the herds with a variety of breeds so the milk is not all low or high butterfat.

All her goats are registered pure breeds and she has had national champions in four different breeds in shows that correspond to dog shows or cat shows. Redwood Hill sells



breeding stock to goat owners all over the country. In 2006 it became the first Certified Humane goat dairy in the United States.

a grove of creative cheeses

Humboldt Fog, Purple Haze, Truffle Tremor, and Bermuda Triangle are just a few of the show-stopping cheeses from Cypress Grove Chevre in Arcata. Mary Keehn, owner and cheesemaker, works with pasteurized Alpine goat's milk in the foggy coastal area of northern California. In search of a healthful lifestyle, she got her start farming in the '60s and '70s, establishing a commercial cheesemaking facility in 1983.

Before she delved into professional cheesemaking, she had developed an interest in a sustainable lifestyle, gardening and even making her own ketchup. Sustainable farming was popular at the same time goat's milk and goat cheese were gaining ground, but none of the cheesemaking women knew about each other.

Keehn had trouble convincing people to taste the goat products. "It was pretty much, 'Goat cheese. Yuck,'" she says. "It was a big uphill battle to get people to put it in their mouths. Things have changed so much." Now, she says, the availability of five or six brands of goat cheese in the supermarket shows how far the industry has come. "It's been quite a change. We

just didn't realize it was ever going to be popular. We didn't have any idea the world would get excited about it."

Keehn describes her current facility as smaller than most people imagine, although in the beginning the operation was even smaller and much less technologically advanced. "I would carry milk from my home in tins in the back of my Volvo station wagon. Nobody has this memory of what it was like in the olden days."

A popular misconception is that cheesemaking is a glamorous, easygoing lifestyle. While cheesemaking still attracts start-ups, Keehn describes it as a huge cleaning job and even likens herself to a dishwasher. "The truth is that so much of what you do is about keeping things clean. When you go to the Fancy Food Show or the American Cheese Society conference and everybody is eating the cheese and saying how wonderful it is, you do get very proud, but that's twice a year. The rest of the year you're on your feet every day, washing and scrubbing walls."

All that dirty work and contamination prevention leads to an unexpected fashion dilemma for goat ladies — choice of footwear. "You have your different shoes. You have your barn boots for when you're in the barn. Then you have to have your boots for when you're in the creamery. Then you have to have your shoes for when

PHOTOS ON THIS PAGE COURTESY OF CYPRESS GROVE CHEVRE



TRUFFLE TREMOR CHEESE

you're in the office. Then you have to have your high heels for when you go to the market."

One threat to small artisan cheesemakers is the increase in specialty production by large companies. Although these "corporate" cheeses are largely machine-made, their prominence on the shelves is growing. A small producer may not have the funds — or the space — for equipment. Keehn says her cheeses would not be the same if they were made by a machine. She requires manpower to give the cheese its trademark human touch. "We haven't figured out how to make a Humboldt Fog without people and still make it taste good. Plus we have 40 employees who have to make a living."

Nonetheless, Keehn believes goat cheesemaking is an attractive cheesemaking option for women. Goats are both practical and interesting for women because they're smaller, easier to manage, and smart. Like Bice, Keehn shows her goats and she's raised three national champion Alpines. Just as the animals are relatively small, often so are their cheeses, making them easier for women to manage. She believes goat cheeses lend themselves more to fresh, smaller styles than hard, aged cheeses. "Those cheeses can be pretty darn heavy," she adds.

Money is a concern to small business owners and artisan cheesemakers. When Keehn first started her cheese business, she had a herd of goats but

little money. When someone offered to buy her entire herd, she accepted because the goats would all stay together and still have a nice home. "We were so poor. It was the perfect situation," she says. Still short on funds after selling the herd, she made her own labels, hand-writing each cheese's name — a task she performed every night after her daughters went to bed.

the next generation

Once the goat path was paved and the nation's palate whetted for novel cheeses, a new crew of women began making their own styles of fresh goat cheeses. Among the second wave of lady goat pioneers are Amy Wend, owner of Skyhill Napa Valley Farms in Napa, and Dee Harley, owner and cheesemaker at Harley Farms Goat Dairy in nearby Pescadero in San Mateo County.

Wend's company produces farmstead chèvre and Feta from Alpines, Nubians, and Saanens. These cheeses reflect the floral and herbaceous notes from area pastures. Harley, originally from Yorkshire, England, also makes floral Alpine goat cheeses — literally floral. Her goat Torte is a layered chèvre decorated with edible flowers.

The veteran women of the California goat cheese scene have been quick to help the newcomers, especially those they meet at the California Artisan Cheese Guild events. "We're all in there trying to help, even start-up companies that are just getting going. It's important for all the consumers to have new products," says Keehn.

Bice, who feels compelled to "give back" after so many people helped her along the way, has been active in guidance and education. She looks over business plans for newcomers and recently put on a first-time-ever two-day cheesemaking workshop in her creamery with the help of a professor from the University of California, Davis. Chenel has worked to educate chefs, food professionals, and consumers.

The three lady goat pioneers of California continue to break ground in cheese fashion, business, and community. They instinctively cleared the underbrush so that more cheesemakers and farmers may return "back to the land." CC



PHOTO COURTESY OF
LALOO'S GOAT MILK ICE CREAM COMPANY

GOAT LADIES 2.0

By JAN FIALKOW

Laura Howard doesn't make goat cheese — she makes goat ice cream! Looking for a way to transition out of her fast-paced filmmaking career, she immersed herself in yoga, which led to a cleansing diet that prohibited caffeine, alcohol and dairy. Giving up caffeine and alcohol was easy, but dairy was another story for this self-described cheese-hound. When she discovered that goat milk doesn't act in the body the way cow's milk does, she found her loophole. "I started 'hoovering' up whatever I could get my hands on — Laura's chèvre, Jennifer's yogurt, Mary's cheese. But there was no ice cream." So she started making it at home. And it was good. That's when her "type-A personality kicked in" and she and her husband started LāLoo's Goat's Milk Ice Cream Company in Sonoma County.

Her ice cream flavors are extraordinary. How about strawberry with a swirl of balsamic vinegar? Or black mission fig? Or chocolate made with melted Sharffen Berger chocolate instead of the usual cocoa powder? Or chèvre with Meyer lemon? Laura also makes frozen yogurt — the flavors include Italian Amarena cherry and cajeta de leche, which she describes as "the lactose-friendly cousin of dulce de leche" as well as the first and only goat ice cream sandwich — Bambinis, a 90-calorie indulgence. CC