

Island farmers raise goats for profit, fun

by LINDSAY CHUNG

FANNY BAY – When Jaki Ayton and Karen Fouracre started their goat micro dairy on Vancouver Island, they already had a customer for their milk.

Salt Spring Island Cheese Company owner David Wood was looking for a Vancouver Island supply of goat's milk for his cheese, and the long-time friends who co-own Snap Dragon Dairy in the Comox Valley had the goats.

Ayton and Fouracre, who are both from Victoria and who have been best friends since high school, started Snap Dragon Dairy in Fanny Bay about a year ago.

Connections

They first met with Wood in November 2009. Ayton is a member of the Vancouver Island Goat Association (VIGA) and a friend had connected them to Wood through that organization.

They began building their dairy that month and made their first shipment of milk in May 2010. They shipped right through to mid-December 2010, took three months off and started shipping milk again this year on April 19.

While building up Snap Dragon Dairy, Fouracre and Ayton visited Gerald Smith's sheep dairy in Black Creek and saw that he could milk 70 sheep by himself.

"We thought we could do this," says Fouracre.

Ayton has always wanted a dairy and seeing Smith's farm

helped her see the possibilities. "When you look at a cow dairy, everything is so big and the production is so massive, you can't really fathom it," she says. "Looking at Gerald ... it became realistic."

Demand was important

Fouracre thinks it's important there was a demand for their goats' milk before they even started the dairy.

"We had a guaranteed customer," she says. "He has a commitment, and he had a successful business."

While the dairy is new, Fouracre and Ayton have been raising goats for many years.

Sixteen years ago, they bought property in Powell River with a group of friends. Fouracre and Ayton are both lactose-intolerant, as were others in their group, so they decided to raise some goats.

Ayton and Fouracre didn't stay in Powell River very long, and they moved to the Comox Valley, buying 1.6 acres in Fanny Bay.

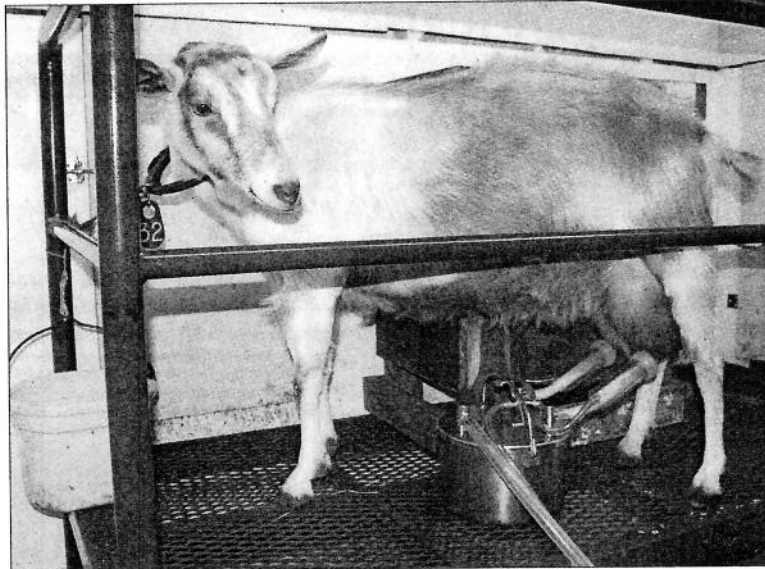
"Neither of us got married, and we couldn't buy a house, so we teamed up to buy this," says Fouracre.

Grow own food

Even at that point, they wanted to grow their own food.

They brought in more goats and added pigs and chickens to the farm.

"(With) goats, the milk's important, but they're small enough you can handle, and they're productive," says Ayton. "They have lots of personali-



Ready for her close up! This Toggenburg goat one of 16 goats milked twice daily at Snap Dragon Dairy on Vancouver Island. The goat dairy has a regular customer in Salt Spring Island Cheese, shipping 300 litres per week to the company, known for its chèvres, which ships cheese across the country and is a regular at the Saturday farmers market. (Lindsay Chung photo)

ty," adds Fouracre. "They're fun."

The goats' personality has become important to Ayton and Fouracre, as they spend so much time with the animals and milk twice a day.

"Like any animal you dairy, it's a lot of work, so it's better if they're fun," notes Ayton.

Ayton and Fouracre believe their experience with animals has helped them find success as dairy farmers.

"I think a big reason we're doing so well is we do have the husbandry experience," says Ayton. "We've had goats a long time, and I've worked with veterinarians. We've had lots of practice with animals."

15 years on the job

After 15 years of farming, Ayton and Fouracre are starting to make enough money to cover their costs.

"If you can actually cover

your costs, it's good," says Fouracre. "Now that we're selling the milk, we have more goats to produce the milk. Otherwise, we would be milking seven to eight goats. Now, we're milking 16 goats."

Ayton and Fouracre are now at a point where they can start construction projects to improve their farm buildings.

"I think because (the goats)

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Swiss goat is the oldest registered breed in the world

by LINDSAY CHUNG

Snap Dragon Dairy specializes in Toggenburg goats, a Swiss dairy breed that is rare in Canada.

They're a smaller goat, and they are common in dairies in Europe because their milk makes good cheese, explains Karen Fouracre.

"They're also the oldest registered breed of animal in the world," she says, noting they go back to the 1600s.

Snap Dragon Dairy, which is only licensed to sell to a processor, is not organic because it is not financially viable, but the farm is pesticide- and chemical-free. They use organic feed whenever they can.

They have 39 goats, including three bucks, and they milk 16.

Fouracre and her business partner, Jackie Ayton, get the males slaughtered and sell the meat locally to restaurants, eat some meat themselves and use

some meat for their dogs.

In the summer, Ayton and Fouracre, who help with 4-H, show their purebred goats at fairs.

Fouracre considers getting their permanent licence for dairy certification a very exciting moment in the past year.

Snap Dragon Dairy is seasonal, and Ayton believes that is a big plus.

"One thing that's been really good that we decided before is we only milk seasonally," she says. "We milk nine months of the year. We get three months off, and so do the goats, and that's when they're pregnant. It makes it much easier."

Ayton feels the best part of this year was having 29 baby goats on the farm.

Looking forward, Fouracre and Ayton are talking about increasing production for Salt Spring Island Cheese to 400 litres a week next year.



Jaki Ayton takes special pleasure in raising the baby goats born each spring at Snap Dragon Dairy in Fanny Bay. She, along with business partner Karen Fouracre, raise their breeding stock, milk their females, slaughter the males for meat, help with 4-H and show their purebred Toggenburg goats at the fairs. (Lindsay Chung photo)

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Learning curve was bolstered by advice from local cow dairies

are starting to pay for themselves, we can improve their living quarters," says Ayton. "We're making it nicer for the animals, adding equity to the farm and making it easier for us."

Regulations, regulations

For Ayton and Fouracre, one of the biggest challenges in starting a small goat dairy was meeting the regulations for licensing, as they are the same as those for a cow dairy.

"We had a lot of help from inspectors, some of the cattle dairy farmers," says Ayton, while Fouracre added that Island

Dairy Services Ltd., their equipment suppliers, were very helpful.

Ayton and Fouracre say finding equipment that was small enough for what they wanted and finances were also big challenges.

"We budgeted for X amount and went over," notes Ayton. "There are surprises."

One of those surprises was adding eight feet to their existing milking parlour. The smallest dairy tank they could find was 1,000 litres so they had to expand the parlour to fit the tank.

They found a small two-goat milking machine made by

Hoegggers, a company in the US, which – rather than being adapted for goats – was built specifically for goats.

They have one portable milk stand and one stand that can hold two goats at a time.

When they milk the goats, the milk goes into 10-litre food-grade plastic buckets, which are floated in ice water in the tank.

Because they don't have the volume, the milk would freeze in the tank if they put it right in, noted Ayton.

"We don't produce enough milk to use the tank," explains Fouracre. "The buckets float in ice water, and it works beautifully because it chills the milk so fast, and it's all sanitized because it's food-grade plastic."

Quality is excellent

Fouracre and Ayton send the milk in for testing every month, and they have improved continuously. Their milk quality is now above excellent.

"A lot of it is the animals are really healthy," says Ayton. "I think a lot of people miss that – the healthier your animals are, the better the milk is."

"One thing that's nice about them being so friendly is they're used to being handled," notes Fouracre. "They like you. It doesn't take a lot of convincing."

Snap Dragon Dairy is now producing enough milk to ship 300 litres to Salt Spring Island Cheese per week, set aside 30 litres per week to feed the pigs and keep 10 litres per week for Ayton and Fouracre.

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