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Fresh From the Farm

Goat's milk from new Fanny Bay dairy helps keep things local for Island cheesemaker...

By Jane E. Burton • June, 2010

Vancouver Island's newest micro goat dairy is located on Holiday Road in Fanny Bay. Unless you knew that fact, you could easily drive by the Snap Dragon Goat Dairy and be unaware that it was there.

Karen Fouracre and Jaki Ayton have been developing their compact 1.6 acre farm for the last 14 years. A mixed farming operation, they raise hogs for meat, goats for milk, and chickens for eggs. There are gardens and a 40-foot greenhouse in the front yard. Peach, pear, cherry, apple and plum trees are sprinkled around the property. Behind the house you'll find various small buildings, the new milking parlor, several paddocks and pastures.

Over the years they have tried raising ducks, turkeys, sheep, rabbits, peacocks and cows to see what works best for them and their property. Goats have been part of the herd from the start. In addition to providing milk, the goats have contributed to Ayton and Fouracre's recreation opportunities and extended their network of friends.

Ayton shows some of the purebred Toggenberg goats at the summer fairs. One of them, La Mountain Dutchess, is very close to achieving permanent grand champion status. Both women are active in local 4-H Club activities giving goat care workshops and assisting as judges. "They can't have the parents sitting in on their kid's presentation; they need spare adults to come," says Fouracre. "They do some amazing presentations, it is the most fun, and it is really entertaining. They put a lot of work into it. So it has really enriched our lives."



Karen Fouracre, along with her partner Jaki Ayton, runs Snap Dragon Goat Dairy in Fanny Bay.

Photo by Boomer Jerritt

The idea to establish a micro dairy came when David Wood, the owner of the Salt Spring Island Cheese Company, approached the Vancouver Island Goat Association (VIGA) last fall looking for milk from Island producers. He was buying milk in the Fraser Valley and wanted to find sources closer to home. As members of the VIGA, Fouracre and Ayton heard of the enquiry and they immediately began to investigate whether or not they could start a dairy. Selling their milk to the cheese company would provide them with a way to offset the costs of keeping their ever-growing goat herd.

"I have quite a few goats now and quite a few purebreds and they're not cheap," says Ayton. "We did some

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stats for the Vancouver Island Goat Association a couple of years ago and it is about \$750 per year to keep an adult female goat.”

Logistically it worked because Salt Spring Island Cheese was already purchasing sheep’s milk from a farm in Black Creek, thus making a Fanny Bay stop convenient. High start up costs had always been a stumbling block to the idea of setting up a dairy. Cow dairies have setup costs in the hundreds of thousands of dollars. Also, the milk marketing board establishes quotas that can be both difficult and expensive to purchase. They discovered that the small number of goat dairies in BC makes quotas unnecessary thus leaving the question of the start up costs. “We got a tour of the sheep dairy,” says Fouracre. “The fellow was very nice and let us come and take a look. He has a very simple operation and we went and looked at it and said we can do this.”

They have decided to milk 14 of their 33 goat herd. Most of the commercial goat dairies in BC have herds of 200-500 animals. The approximately 300 litres of milk per week that Snap Dragon will produce would be the equivalent of a large dairy’s single day output. However, that amount of output spread over the eight months of the year that they will sell to Salt Spring Island Cheese should achieve the objective of “getting the girls to pay for themselves.”

In order to get licensed as a Grade A dairy, Fouracre and Ayton had to absorb the very detailed regulations of the BC Dairy code and build to its strict specifications. “It was a matter of finding people who could help us out,” explains Ayton of how they approached the task. “Island Dairy Products is the guy who services all the big dairies. So we phoned Lawrence, we talked to him. He’s been a really good resource. We talked to Gerald Smith who has a sheep dairy and asked him tons of questions. I talked to some of the big goat dairy people on the mainland, and just asking questions, reading it, checking, emailing the BC licensing place back and forth, etc.” In the Fanny Bay community they found many people to help them, including retired dairyman and neighbor Glenn Plewis, who assisted with contacts to source the various components needed.

“One of the hardest things is to do was find a dairy tank that was small enough,” says Fouracre. Adds Ayton: “Getting the equipment small enough has been expensive. Everything is very big. There is commercial stuff that is big or there is specialty stuff that is completely out of line expensive.”

It took three months to find a dairy tank that would work. They finally found one in the Fraser Valley—at 1,000 litres it is bigger than they need but the smallest they could find. Karen had to significantly modify the plans for the milking parlor/processing building in order to make it fit. In order to meet the goal of shipping milk in May, many of their friends and Holiday Road neighbors have been called upon to assist with their expertise and a helping hand. They are most appreciative of all the assistance they have received and they look forward to paying it back with their own labor. “We’ve had friends, three or four times now, we’ve had anywhere from two to seven of them show up for a day and help us build,” says Fouracre.



On May 10 their dairy dream became a reality when Salt Spring Island Cheese owner David Wood came to help pick up the first shipment of milk. Wood, originally from Scotland, moved to Toronto in 1973 to work as executive director of Pollution Probe. His entrepreneurial endeavors prior to establishing Salt Spring Island Cheese in 1994 included Solartech, a renewable energy company, and, the David Wood Food Shop, which by 1989 included three Toronto stores and a catering division. Salt Spring Island Cheese specializes in handmade goat and sheep cheeses.

Fouracre and Ayton are pleased to share their knowledge of raising goats and how to approach setting up a micro dairy. “If you are going to start with animals, join all the animal clubs first,” says Fouracre. “Then get your animals.”

Ayton agrees. “It’s like getting a dog. You want to know the community, know the breeders, get the history and background and then start spending large quantities of money.”

Mastering the art of animal husbandry is their number one recommendation for anyone thinking of setting up a dairy. Get to know your

animals and how to care for them. This will keep them healthy, which will ensure a good product and will

A goat.

Photo by Boomer Jerritt

keep the vet bills down. They are very proud of the fact that their goats have nice personalities and, on average, they live to be about 24 years of age. The average life span for a goat is about 15 years.

Another tip from Fouracre: “Keep the farm clean and tidy because if you don’t, you’ll have a vet bill. If there is something lying around that shouldn’t be there, you should move it. Either that or it is going to be tripped over, stepped on or swallowed.

“One thing we learned early is there is no such thing as tomorrow,” she adds. “There’s no such thing as later either—we’ll do it later. It’s like, okay, that fence is looking wobbly. No, you fix it now! Whatever you were doing you fix the fence now. Or you’re searching for the goats later, or you’re getting up because they’re in the garage and they’re in the feed. Or, the buck is breeding the does you didn’t want bred, you know! When all you had to do was stop for 20 minutes, get the nails and the hammer and fix the fence. But you didn’t do that so now you’ve got this!”

Ayton outlines some of the essential elements for setting up a dairy: “Estimate high on all your expenses—we had a business plan and a business plan budget. There are a couple of really good ones online and we went through and figured it out,” she says. “I know our price point of how much each goat has to produce per day. Each one has to produce a good amount of milk, we can’t have loafers. And you have to be willing to be a farmer, which means cull. And cull to us means kill. It means different things to different people. You have to be willing to look at your herd and say, ‘Okay that one’s no good; they have to go to the butcher.’ I mean you love them to death, like the babies, you get lots of babies every year, you can’t keep them all. And that’s just part of the animal part of it. Seeing these are the good ones, these aren’t good ones. Taking the time to figure it out and then getting rid of the ones that aren’t productive.”

Fouracre agrees, adding, “That took a long time to learn. That is a whole mind set that took two or three or four years to start thinking that way; to actually be able to do it.”

Adds Ayton: “Most people only have goats for four years, because they’re not farmers and they don’t get rid of them. If you start with two goats you can have 15 in four years if you don’t get rid of them.”

The women have obviously worked hard to learn all the necessary parts of farming. Listening to them describe their dairy and how they take care of their animals it is easy to assume that farming is in their background. In fact, says Ayton, it took some years to learn how to view their goats like farmers. “I wasn’t raised on a farm; I grew up in a townhouse. We’re not farmers by birth.”

But they are now dedicated farmers by choice. Ayton still works off the farm in public health but with the launch of the dairy, Fouracre is now working at home full time. In addition to her dairy chores, she will also be selling produce, flowers, eggs, fruit and hand-drawn art cards from a farm stall. They love what they do and where they live. They also love sharing the experience with others. This past April they held their second “Open Farm Day” where anyone interested was invited to visit the farm and see the animals up close. Donations are collected to go to YANA and it also serves as a form of self-preservation.

“It’s just for fun,” says Ayton. “Everyone wants to come and see the babies. They want to see the farm and see the goats, so we open the farm. We have so many people who want to come and see the babies we figured we better designate a day, otherwise you don’t get anything done.”

Watch for their ads next year so you don’t miss the chance to visit these two interesting women and see this most unique micro dairy operation.

2 RESPONSES TO FRESH FROM THE FARM

By Barb • June 21, 2010

Thank you for that interesting article. These are two courageous woman who have embarked on an interesting venture. Having just been in Barkerville for the weekend it is obvious you two have the same mettle and dream that our long ago miners had. We wish you more success than some of the miners – keep up the good work! Love Barb

By [Spring on a Farm](#) | [FamilyNavigation.com](#) • June 26, 2010

[...] They call themselves Snapdragon Dairy. Here are a few links describing what they do. One from Infocus Magazine and one from Eyes On BC. We didn’t have any crazy things happen to write about; no crying [...]

