
ARTISANS

BY EILEEN M. DUFFY

A CHEESE COMPANY AGES

Raising kids on the farm.



MATTITUCK—Karen Catapano stands in her in-laws' greenhouse holding a baby goat and soda bottle filled with fresh goat's milk. Through a rubber nipple the Nubian kid greedily sucks down the contents until the stark white liquid drips down its chin.

The greenhouse smells of the ripe odor of goat cheese, familiar to anyone who has spread *chèvre* on a piece of bread or chopped feta for a Greek salad.

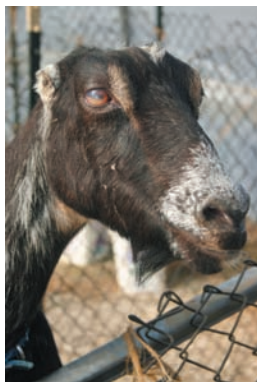
In separate pens, female goats are in various stages of gestation and motherhood. Pint-sized kids wander around, following Karen and passing in and out of the pens through the slats in the fences. If another mother's kid enters a pen, the doe will nose him out. Only

Above: Karen Catapano supplements the mother's milk for a newborn Nubian doeling. **Opposite:** La Mancha goats have the best dispositions and are recognizable for having no external ears.

her babies are allowed to nurse.

This year Karen and her husband Michael will oversee the births of close to 100 kids. They will keep some and sell the others to other dairies, ending up with 96 goats in their herd—the maximum allowed by the town—in the dairy they are building in the back of their new home on Route 48, known locally as the North Road, in Peconic. The number suits Michael. Any more goats and the upkeep would render his cheese-making operation uneconomical, he said.

Photographs: Eileen M. Duffy



The new building, which will house the goats (they can take colder temperatures but hate the rain), the cheese-making equipment, and a temperature-controlled room for aging the cheese, is a big step up from the farm's former quarters a few miles west.

In 2003, the Catapano's bought an existing farm, fulfilling Karen's passion for animals and Michael's curiosity about making cheese. What started out as a hobby with 25 to 30 goats soon took on a life of its own. By the next year, after Michael took courses with some of the best cheesemakers in the state and Karen researched raising and keeping goats, the farm was profitable and their products were selling out.

It was time to move.

And now in the spring, work crews have cleared the land on the five acres behind a large house to erect the steel barn. Behind the barn, the herd of goats, separated from the males, play around Karen and climb on top of her when she bends down to pet them.

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"They will jump on you," she said. "They're very friendly."

The new facility will double the Catapano's production, provide more

parking and allow Karen more workspace to make skin care products from the goat's milk.

Aside from selling all they make, the Catapano's cheese was recognized by the American Cheese Society when their fresh chèvre was named the best in the country.

For Michael, who is known around the farm as the Cheese Whiz (Karen's the Dairy Queen), this means he's been doing the right thing and will continue to provide the goats with the best quality food, keep the dairy spotless and sell everything as fresh as possible.

"Everyone thinks goats will eat anything," he said. "But they're actually very picky eaters. Once it goes on the ground, they won't touch it." To accommodate these gourmands, the Catapano's buy alfalfa from a woman upstate who grows her own. "It's nice quality hay," said Michael. "It looks good enough to eat."

He plans to build a feeding station that will keep the hay off the ground and minimize waste. As it is, the couple goes through about 450 pounds of alfalfa each day, close to 10 pounds per goat.

Goat's milk, he said, takes on "off" flavors very easily. And in the wild, as the food changes with the season, goat's milk will taste differently at different times of the year. By feeding the goats the same thing

all the time, the cheese's taste will be consistent. In the dairy, cleanliness is monitored by state inspectors, and the farm stand in front of the new barn ensures the cheese is sold at the height of freshness.

"We always sell within days," said Michael. "No more than a week. If it's aged more than that it will have a different taste." Michael compared his cheese with what people buy in the supermarket: "Cheese in the grocery store is made with powdered milk and frozen curd, which gives it a longer shelf life." But these ingredients also compromise the range of tastes.

This summer the selection at Catapano will grow as Michael experiments with new varieties. He will make the soft fresh chèvre, feta and yogurt that have been popular and try to make aged cheeses like cheddar, blue, and a provolone-type that will take a year to be ready.

To make mold-ripened cheese, like the blue, Michael buys the mold, which comes in two different types, differentiated mostly by color. To distribute the veins throughout the cheese he pokes holes using a knitting needle to give the mold the oxygen it needs to grow. New York State requires that the cheese age for at least 60 days. The longer it ages, the more pungent it gets, but Michael likes to keep the center soft and buttery.

Back in the greenhouse, the Catapanos are still waiting for three more does to have their kids. The first of the year were born on Valentine's Day, after a mating season that spanned September and October. The kids will keep coming until the middle of April and then the first two months of milk goes to the babies. The mothers will continue to produce milk for the next six months.

New females can get pregnant as yearlings, but will not become efficient milkers until they are two or three years old. After that their productivity will last five to six years. Goats live 12 to 15 years.

"They love to get milked," said Karen. "They eat while it's going on, and it's very relaxing for them."

She plans to get an automatic milking machine from a woman upstate, because the repetitive motion gets hard on the hands.

Michael surveyed the work taking over his new backyard. In addition to his career as a doctor in a walk-in clinic on the South Fork, he and Karen are busy feeding the new goats twice a day, tending to births, and landscaping the grounds surrounding the dairy.

"We will *never* move again," he said. □

Catapano Dairy Farm, 33705 North Road in Peconic, is open daily, except Tuesdays, 9 a.m.–6 p.m. during the milking season, which runs from May 1 to November 1. After November 1, the Goatique, which sells goat's milk skin care products, is open on weekends. 765-8042, www.catapanodairyfarm.com.