



featured

Slow Goat Farm gallops

Justina Russell

The name of Lindsey Washkoviak and Ben Elzay's farm may be "Slow Goat Farm," but don't let the name fool you – there is nothing sluggish about the way they manage their newly established operation.

The couple started their farm for fun three years ago when the Wyoming Food Freedom Act passed the Wyoming Legislature, allowing them to sell fresh milk and cheese produced in their home kitchen to informed consumers (see bit.ly/wyfoodfreedom).

In 2014, when some of their friends were wanting to sell their animals, they purchased goats and have since added a milk cow and chickens for eggs and meat production. They have been busy diversifying their farm, while striving to maintain a sustainable land base. The animals have free access to the surrounding hay meadows, as well as a plentiful supply of minerals, grain, and clean water.

The farm has recently started following a rotational grazing practice using goats to manage invasive weeds and promote pasture health. Ben also uses his scythe to cut their hay grasses by hand for the animals to enjoy throughout the winter.

Animals on the Farm

On the farm you will find:

- 11 Nigerian dwarf goats – this breed is ideal for making cheese because they have been bred for producing some of the sweetest-tasting milk that contains a high amount of butter fat. Nigerian Dwarfs are a miniature dairy goat breed that is about the size of a medium-sized dog. They are very lovable and easy to handle, making them easy milkers and great pets. This year, if everything goes well, Slow Goat Farm could have up to 15 goat kids and will be keeping some of the females to add to their operation.
- A healthy flock of chickens that produce an abundance of eggs. Meat birds are also harvested for home consumption and sale.
- A milk cow – Bessie is a Jersey-Holstein cross that joined the farm this winter, and she has really helped ramp up cheese production. Every 4.5 gallons of milk can make approximately 4 pounds of cheese. Bessie's milk has allowed Ben and Lindsey to branch out into new cheese varieties that take anywhere from 1 month to over 1 year to age.

Getting Started

The idea to start producing and selling cheese was born from Lindsey's background, as she is a Wisconsin native and a huge lover of cheese! She and Ben would consider themselves "foodies," meaning they take an interest in all things food related, especially locally produced or harvested foods. They have experimented for years with home food processing making everything from fermented lemons to sauerkraut and preserving much of the bounty from a home garden. They began making cheese five years ago with milk from local herd shares. Producing and selling their cheeses seemed natural when the Food Freedom Act



Nigerian dwarf goats

landowners

into marketplace

passed. Consumers should be aware unpasteurized milk products can convey certain diseases. Information about raw milk and food safety can be found in this Centers for Disease Control and Prevention publication bit.ly/wyorawmilksafety.

Making cheese is just as much of an art as a science. Each variety develops its flavors from bacteria, molds, and enzymes naturally found in the milk and are added as starter cultures. Even the animal's diet and the time of year can affect the flavor of the finished cheese.

The art of cheese making is in the affinage, or aging of cheeses. Each cheese has a very different curing process during which factors like temperature, moisture, additives such as enzymes and salts, and aging techniques come together in the finished product. Ben and Lindsey are self-taught cheese makers and have made many trial-and-error batches to find what works. Over a five-year period, they took what they already knew about food production, did some extensive reading on the subject, and have taken a few cheese making courses to get to where they are today.



Ben Elzay and Lindsey Washkoviak and one of their Nigerian dwarf goats.

The list of over 15 varieties of cheese Slow Goat Farm hopes to offer includes:

Goat cheeses	Cow cheeses
Chevre	Cream cheese
Boursin	Yogurt
Cabecou	Gouda
St. Marcellon	Manchego
Telemea	Colby
Obanon	Cheddar
	Asiago
	Parmesan
	Valencay aka Black Mountain
	Mozzarella
	Ricotta
	Havarti



Black Mountain cheese



Mold cheese

Marketing the Produce

Slow Goat Farm has been selling cheeses, along with other farm products, at the Lander Valley Farmer's Market for two years. They have learned it is a balancing act to produce the types of cheeses people are familiar with and will readily buy, and the less familiar cheeses that may become a new family favorite.

One of the most interesting cheese varieties they are developing is a mold-ripened cow's milk cheese they have lovingly named Black Mountain, after the towering mountain that sits behind the farm. This cheese is most similar to a brie in texture and taste and is aged using locally harvested chokecherry ash, salt, a strain of penicillin, and several other molds. The molds grow on the ash-covered surface of the cheese

changing its texture and flavor as it ages. It has a beautiful appearance, and they hope it will become a popular variety.

In addition, they do a fair amount of sales through a customer email list and from their Facebook page, where they also share with the community the day-to-day farm happenings, such as the arrival of the first goat kids this spring. The farm offers special incentives and deals during certain times of the year, like their "Cheese of the Month Club" that allows regular customers to be the first to sample some of their new or limited quantity cheeses.

Next Steps

At some point the Slow Goat Farm may become a certified dairy and invest in the development of a

commercial kitchen so they can sell their cheese to local Fremont County restaurants and retail stores.

If the farm continues to grow and their products gain even more popularity in the Lander community, Lindsey and Ben may eventually transition out of their day jobs, of a habitat biologist and electrician, to become full-time farmers and cheese entrepreneurs.

During a visit to the farm you may see what many Wyomingites call "speed goats" or pronghorn, as well as "slow elk," also known as cows, wandering the hills of the beautiful backdrop of the farm; however, you will only find 11 friendly Nigerian dwarf goats and their kids frolicking, as well as their cow, on the Slow Goat Farm.

Justina Russell's territory as University of Wyoming Extension educator includes the wonderful Wind River Mountain range, the spectacular Tetons – and most of western Wyoming. She is based in Fort Washakie and can be reached at (307) 332-2135 or jtoth1@uwyo.edu.