

# Goatherding: An Alternative Lifestyle



*This article first appeared in the April 1992 edition of Backroads, when Jerry Lou Drake and I were both single girls living a rugged life here on the mountain. We became fast friends and she let me interview her for the newspaper about keeping goats and all the healthy, nutritious products they provide. Fast forward a few years and our “single” status changed when we both found the man of our dreams with whom to share our simplistic lifestyle. Over the years that followed, a lot has changed but our enduring friendship has held strong and we still enjoy having a cup of tea together sitting by the warmth of the kitchen woodstove, catching up on each other’s news.*

**S**he laughs and calls them “the poor man’s cow” but for Jerry Lou Drake of Love, Virginia, goatherding has become a way of life that is anything but funny. The curious, inquisitive animals provide much of Jerry’s diet and a source of constant enjoyment in the rural lifestyle she loves and has chosen for herself.

Originally from Chesterfield County, Virginia, Jerry Lou started raising goats as a result of the “back to the land” movement that swept the country in the early 1970s. Although she was not brought up in a farm atmosphere, she says, “My heart’s always been in the country. I got caught up in the homesteading, living-off-the-land type of thinking that was popular at that time. Back then it was very trendy to want this kind of self-sustaining lifestyle so I got into it with many of my friends. I had an acre of land with a log cabin on it and began to raise my own rabbits and chickens for both meat and eggs. I kept bees and had a garden from which I did my own canning. One year I got a blue ribbon at the Chesterfield County Fair for my canned tomatoes. I planted fruit and nut trees and all types of herbs that I used in cooking. The only thing I lacked was milk production. Because I didn’t have enough land to support a cow and because I really didn’t need that much milk, I thought about getting some goats. Reading everything I could about the care and handling of dairy goats, I soon invested in my first animal and began to learn how to milk her.

“I guess I really wanted to see just how much I could do for myself back then. One by one my homesteading friends fell by the wayside. Suddenly they didn’t want to do the ‘pioneer thing’ anymore and they went on to a less strenuous lifestyle. But for me, I began to get deeper and deeper into it as I went along. When the Mother Earth News magazine came out, suddenly all the things I valued were there in print and I poured over and savored every word I could read about this kind of stuff. It was exactly the way I felt about things.

Four years ago this fall (the article was published in 1992), I took a job transfer to this area, seeking a more rural setting to pursue this kind of life. Chesterfield County was becoming more and more urbanized and the land around my cabin was being zoned residential, which was causing problems with keeping livestock. When the opportunity arose for me to leave, I packed up my belongings and three goats in the back of my pickup truck. You should have seen us coming through the toll booths in Richmond, with the goats sticking their heads out the windows! I felt just like Granny Clampett.”

Since moving to this area, Jerry Lou has settled on a small farm here in Love, continuing to raise chickens and a big garden, playing host to an assortment of cats and two dogs by the names of Chloe and MacLean. However, her first love continues to be the Nubian dairy goats, which she raises here on the mountain. She has become quite proficient at goatherding and sitting at her kitchen table talking over coffee laced with goat’s milk cream, I learned a great deal about these interesting creatures. In her own words, Jerry Lou explains some background history of goats that date back to the earliest times.

“Goats, like deer, are what they call browsers, preferring to eat woody plants up off the ground. They can and will eat grass if that’s all they have, but they would rather nibble at twigs and bark



*Part of Jerry Drake’s Nubian goat herd at her farm in Love*



from trees. Like deer, the females are called does and the males, bucks. The offspring are called kids and a neutered male is called a wether.

“More than half the world’s population drinks goat’s milk and in the Middle East countries especially, goats are very popular because they can survive on the poorest of land, pulling nutrition out of nearly everything they eat. The reason they can do this, as opposed to a cow, is that they have not been overly domesticated yet. They have the ability to survive on little or nothing because much of their wild instinct is still intact.

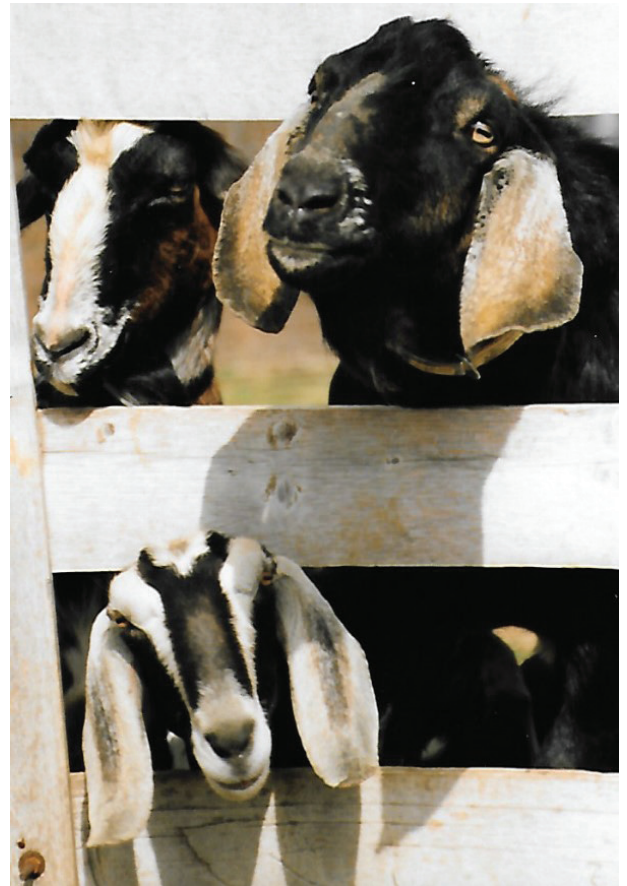
“There are many types of goat breeds such as the French Alpines, Saanens and Toggenburgs, most of which are the Swiss breeds. I raise Nubians, which are really an Anglo-Egyptian breed.

Although Nubians originated in the Middle East, the English then took the animal and bred into it some other qualities that have made it a very desirable animal. For instance, they seem to be bigger and meatier than most other breeds. And they are very healthy and have good dairy qualities that make them one of the most popular breeds today. Another unusual trait of this particular goat is they will breed out of the normal season, which is typically in the fall. Nubians will cycle all year long. Although they do tend to breed better and more readily in the autumn months, I have had kids born in October and they did just fine. The gestation period for goats is five months.

“Like Jersey cows, Nubians have a higher butterfat content to their milk, as opposed to a Holstein cow’s three-and-a-half to four-and-a-half percent butterfat content, the Nubian’s butterfat ranges from four-and-a-half to six percent butterfat, making it a much richer milk than most. In addition, the milk is naturally homogenized, which is why so many doctors recommend it for infants and adults who cannot readily tolerate cow’s milk. There is something about the molecular structure that makes it more digestible than other milks.”

Jerry Lou uses and makes a variety of products from her goats, including milk, cheese, ice cream, yogurt, and meat. When questioned about her cheesemaking abilities, Jerry laughs good naturedly and says, “I can say in cheese production that I’ve made good cheese and I’ve made horrible cheese. I’d be the first to admit that I am just learning how to make cheese. I can make a consistently good cottage cheese and farmer’s cheese, but there was a batch of mozzarella that had the consistency of a rubber band. VERY chewy!

“Because of the high butterfat content, ice cream made from goat’s milk is very rich and tasty. In making yogurt, the milk is heated to a certain temperature and some beneficial bacteria is added to it. It



*Lucy, Jitterbug & Nancy Sinatra*

is then held in a warm place for a few hours and as it curdles, it becomes yogurt. I add all kinds of fruit to it and it really is good.

“As far as the meat goes, I used to butcher my own animals, but now I send them out to a local processing plant. I try to use only the bucks and have found that the flavor and texture of the meat is best if the animal is around four months old. The flavor is like a cross between venison and veal. Many times, I will fry up sausage for breakfast when I have guests and they are amazed at how good the meat tastes. For some reason, people have the misconception that products from these animals have an unpleasant “goaty” taste. Goat’s milk, for instance, tastes exactly like cow’s milk but the canned variety has, in my opinion, given goat’s milk a bad name. What they do to it to make it taste that way I don’t know, but whatever it is, it’s awful!

“Also, I have successfully made my own goat’s milk soap. Many of the Hollywood stars swear by it, saying it’s like putting fresh cream on your face. It doesn’t lather up as much as commercial soap but it gets you just as clean and leaves your skin soft.

“As far as milking goes, right now I am only milking one goat. I milk once in the evening, getting what I need and letting the kids have the rest. It amounts to around a quart a day. For me, milking is the most enjoyable part of goatkeeping. It has become my inner sanctum, the thing that takes me away from the everyday worries of this world. As I lean my head up against the animal, I find myself getting into a certain rhythm so that my thoughts are free to escape the pressures and the rush of life. It’s just me and the animal, with a kind of communion between us that’s hard to put into words. Sometimes I sit on a big rock above their pen and just watch them play. They are such happy, inquisitive animals and you can’t help but be affected by them. I can come home in the worst mood and when I see them all standing there, waiting for me to come feed or pat them, I realize the unconditional love they give to me and it always makes me feel better inside.

“My goats have become my hobby, I guess. I spend time with them like someone would spend time on the golf course. For that reason, I can’t help but notice the things they do. Goats in general have a certain type of personality but there is a lot of variance within. They are very curious, and social creatures. You may have heard people say, ‘they will eat the clothes right off the line.’ Actually, they won’t eat the clothes but they will taste them. If something is edible, they will eat it. I’ve seen Lucy in the barnyard, chomping away on a paper bag. It’s the cellulose, the fiber, [that] she’s after. She won’t touch a plastic bag because she knows it’s not edible.

In the goat herd, the animals will pick a leader, usually an older female called a matriarch. They will follow her lead and I’ve observed them watching her taste various plants as she browses along. If she deems the plant edible, then they will all begin to nibble at it. If she avoids it, they all will. Goats seem to instinctively know what is and what is not edible.

“I dehorn all my animals at an early age for several good reasons. If goats are kept in more of a wild atmosphere, they need their horns for protection but in the type of domesticated environment I keep them in, they can hurt each other, they can hurt me, or perhaps someone else who happens to be near them. And there have been far too many nights that I’ve had to go out and pull a goat’s head back out of the fence after they’ve gotten their horns stuck in the wire.”

Jerry Lou names all her goats according to the season, lineage, color, or her mood. For in-



*Milking: Jerry Lou's most enjoyable task*

stance, “Valentine” came into the world on February 14. “Nancy Sinatra” had four white “go-go” boots. “Nina” and “Pinta” were twins born on Columbus Day. In addition, when she sells a goat, Jerry tries to match up people’s needs with the animal’s needs. “If a person is just starting out and wants a milk goat, I try to pick out a sweet-tempered animal so it will be a pleasure for both of them. That doesn’t have to be so much of a consideration when a person just wants a goat to clean up a few acres of land.”

In summing up the interview, I asked Jerry Lou what the worst part of being a goatherd was. She admitted that it is losing the animals to death prematurely. This year I lost an older doe through a breech birth and that is always such a loss. It’s sad to lose a newborn but when it is an older animal, it’s almost like losing a good friend.”

And the best part? A soft smile comes across Jerry Lou’s face as she describes what her goats mean to her.

“I love holding a healthy, happy newborn kid in my arms. There is nothing quite as precious as a baby goat. Even people who don’t like goats have to admit there is no baby animal that’s cuter. They come into the world so strong and independent for the most part. A lot of people ask me why I do all this hard work? Hauling heavy sacks of feed and hay around. Delivering newborns; taking care of the animals in the harshness of winter? I’ve sat in the kitchen drinking a fresh glass of goat’s milk, feeling the satisfaction that comes from inside, knowing I have provided for my goats



and they, in turn, are providing for me. I am getting a return on my investment when they give their products back to me. All the energy I put into my animals I get back in milk, meat and manure for my garden. The cycle of life goes on, as animals and humans provide for each other. When I sit down to a table of healthy food that I've provided for myself, there is an inner satisfaction that goes beyond words."

As the interview wound down, I look closely at this soft-spoken woman and realize how deep her feelings for her animals and the land go. She is one of the original 1970s homesteaders who didn't quit, but went on to make the land work for her. And she clearly loves the alternative lifestyle she's chosen; it shows in the warm smile that always graces her face. Along with all the knowledge she has imparted to me in this interview about her animals, comes the realization that I have also found in Jerry Lou Drake, a kindred spirit.

## Goat's Milk Yogurt

**A**fter the above interview about Jerry Lou Drake's goatherd abilities, we got together later that summer and she showed me the step-by-step process of making goat's milk yogurt. Here is the story, both in text and photos, of how she does it.

Jerry explained that yogurt could be made from any type of milk, including soy milk, which is derived from the soy bean. But this day she was using the milk from her goats. The milk is heated to just the boiling point to destroy any harmful bacteria that would interfere with the beneficial bacteria that aid in the fermentation process. The milk is then cooled to lukewarm and is inoculated with the lacto bacillus (the culture that causes the yogurt to ferment). If the milk is too hot, it kills the bacteria needed to make the yogurt.

Jerry Lou starts with two quarts of milk. For the starter culture, she uses just natural plain yogurt from a grocery store or a culture can be purchased from a health food store. Out of each batch of yogurt, she saves four ounces of starter culture per quart of milk for future batches. She says it is important to try and get the freshest yogurt in the store.

The finished product can be kept for around eight days in the refrigerator as opposed to the raw milk that is half the shelf life of yogurt. The benefit of yogurt is that its bacteria is the same type harbored in our intestinal tract so it replenishes the natural bacteria needed by our body.

When getting ready to make the yogurt, Jerry always uses clean utensils, preferably enamelware for a purer product. She says aluminum sometimes is pitted and can harbor other types of bacteria. She preheats the container she's going to use for the incubation period with hot water. Or she says you can use a commercial yogurt maker or a covered casserole dish in a warm oven. The idea is to keep it warm for at least four hours so that it can process. Jerry used a gallon glass jar wrapped in towels and placed in a picnic cooler to maintain the proper temperature for the desired time.

The yogurt is finished when the jar can be slowly tilted and the yogurt is very thick, like heavy cream. To make it even thicker, a few tablespoons of non-fat powdered milk can be added when heating.

Fruit can be added as desired and Jerry Lou says that everything from bananas and strawberries to blueberries, raspberries and mandarin oranges are all great in yogurt.

Yogurt can also be used in making salad dressings and dips such as the ranch types. If the yogurt is placed in a cheesecloth bag and the liquids are allowed to drain for around eight hours, the resulting product is a thick cream cheese. Jerry has a recipe for a goat yogurt cream cheese pie that is similar to cheesecake and she says it is out of this world.

Going back to the yogurt, Jerry says the final product must be refrigerated when it's done. And remember to save that cup of starter for the next batch. Two quarts of goat's milk will produce two quarts of yogurt.

Many thanks to Jerry Lou for showing us how to make healthful products directly from the barnyard.



*The yogurt, all ready to sit down and enjoy.*



*"The proof is in the pudding"*



# Step by Step Yogurt Making



*Heating milk to the boiling point*



*Adding 8 oz. of the starter culture*



*Stirring with a whisk to mix thoroughly*



*Pour into incubation container*



*Keep warm for four hours*



*Add any type of fruit to give flavor*





*This article wouldn't be complete without a photo of Jerry Lou's "deck." After our interview, Jerry asked if I'd like to have a glass of sweet tea and sit out on her deck. I was intrigued because I could see that there wasn't a standard deck attached to her farm house. Handing me my tea, she headed for two metal chairs situated on a grassy knoll overlooking her garden with a breathtaking view of the hazy blue mountains in the distance. I admit, it was the most relaxing deck I've ever sat on!*