



Photo: Alice Bulmer



Above: Raw milk cheeses curing on kahikatea shelving. They need to cure for longer than the pasteurised cheeses.

Left: John and Jeanne on the farm with Cherry Blossom (Anglo-Nubian), and Sophie (Saanen): even though the pasture has dried up the goats are still eating well.



Photos: Jeanne and John van Kuyk

Above: Granddaughter Eva van Kuyk with Ylangylang. Note the lush herbal ley with chicory, clover, dandelions, etc.

Right: Milking time: the milking apparatus is the only automated part of the farm. From left to right: Ylang Ylang, Nada, Cleopatra and Nalanja enjoy their daily grain treat.



Healthy goats, healthy cheese

Alice Bulmer visits John and Jeanne van Kuyk of Aroha Organic Goat Cheese.

It's the middle of a drought – and John and Jeanne van Kuyk's 'girls' couldn't be happier. The grass on the farm near Te Aroha may be brown, but there's plenty for the goats to eat: hay and roughage from deep-rooted willows and poplars that bring up essential minerals.

These goats are in terrific shape – both the snowy white Saanens and the brown Anglo-Nubians with long floppy ears. Hot and dry suits goats, Jeanne says, especially the Anglo-Nubians, whose ancestors roamed the Sahara. But the Swiss Saanens also like heat. They all hate cold wet weather, John says. "I'll see the goats heading for the shed, and 15 minutes later it's raining."

Champion cheesemaker

These goats may not know, but they're being looked after by one of New Zealand's top cheesemakers. At the national cheese championships in March, Jeanne took out the Milk Test NZ Champion Cheesemaker Award. Her Aroha Raw Milk Rich Plain cheese also topped the goat cheese section, and her other cheeses won several more medals.

The goats are also champions – there's a row of ribbons in the milking shed from recent shows.

John and Jeanne van Kuyk are pioneers in at least three fields: organic dairy goat farming; small-scale cheese making; and now producing and selling raw milk cheese.

John and Jeanne have kept goats since arriving from Holland in 1981. A neighbour gave them a baby goat as a welcome gift. In 1990 they bought a dairy farm at Te Aroha and in 2000 gained organic certification. In 2001 they decided to follow their hearts and farm dairy goats, starting with two Saanen does. Next they decided to make cheese for sale. Just over 10 years ago, when there were few small cheese producers, getting Food and Safety (now MPI) certification wasn't straightforward, Jeanne says.

In 2010 they added Anglo-Nubians to the herd. The different breeds produce milk with complementary qualities, which is great for the cheese, Jeanne says. John thinks they are probably the only organically certified dairy goat farm in New Zealand.

Small-scale and low-tech

With 43 does, John says the land is understocked. But this allows better control of the health of the goats and the milk. The land also supports 50 organically certified yearling dairy heifers belonging to another farm, which graze in rotation with the goats. This is a parasite control strategy, John says. Also, all the 'girls' get a daily dose of a homemade drench with cider vinegar,

molasses and herbs. And any goat looking slightly out of sorts gets freshly made yoghurt – "they love it".

"Goats aren't trouble as long as you have good fences and provide access to water and good quality food," says John. Their goats eat a green diet, with no grain except for a small treat at milking time. "We believe that a green diet is better for the acid-alkali balance in the goats and therefore in the quality of the milk," Jeanne says.

"Being organic is about observation," John says. Each goat has a name and is known individually. "One day we might notice that Rosie is walking at the back of the herd instead of the front. And it might just mean she's having an off day. Or it might mean there's a problem developing." Homeopathic remedies can usually head off potential problems.

The work is deliberately very hands-on. John and Jeanne believe that avoiding contact with electricity and mechanisation makes a healthier product. The goats and milk only come in contact with electrical currents in the milking shed, where there's a small mobile milking unit. The goats are milked first thing in the morning, and at 5 pm, producing four to five litres of milk per day on average.

Jeanne and John are not against electricity – they use it in the farmhouse. But they think there's too much electrical pollution in our lives. "We believe this causes many health problems," Jeanne says.

Making the cheeses

As we are talking, a beeper goes off. "I have to go and take the cheese off the press," Jeanne says. "We live our lives around the cheese."

Because of hygiene, no visitors are allowed in the cheese room. I watch through a window as Jeanne moves small round cheeses from a wooden Dutch-made press and puts them into bowls to rest for several hours, before they go into an overnight salt bath. Tomorrow, after a short drying period, they go on kahikatea shelves to mature for four to six weeks.

Jeanne makes traditional Gouda, in ten flavours, from plain to herbal flavours, like cumin or nettle, and a 'Nutty Nanny' walnut cheese. Only vegetarian rennet is used. John and Jeanne don't eat meat, and they say animal welfare is a big concern for many of their customers.

Sixty litres of milk produces six large cheeses, or twelve smaller ones, all in the classic round shape. Jeanne produces both raw and pasteurised milk cheese. The raw milk cheese comes out smaller, because it is cured for longer. It is more expensive because of the costly lab tests.

The cheese is in huge demand – there's already a waiting list for next season. They sell it mostly through their website.

Their three adult children – one in Auckland, one in Sydney and one dairy farming in Morrinsville – are the cheese tasting panel.

Raw milk cheese

Since late 2012 Jeanne is the first and currently the only producer in the country making raw milk cheese. The approval process took two and a half years. "MPI were writing the regulations as we went through." Some of the regulations were adapted from Europe, where raw milk products are traditional.

Aroha at a glance

- 50 acres
 - 30 milking does
 - 13 teenagers
 - 4 bucks
 - Farmed by Jeanne and John van Kuyk since 1990
 - Certified organic by BioGro since 2000
 - Fertilisers: Agrisentials rock fertiliser and dolomite
 - Herbal ley self-seeds throughout the farm
- www.organicgoatcheese.co.nz



"It has always been our ultimate dream and goal to produce raw milk goat cheese," Jeanne says. Pasteurisation kills harmful bacteria – but also destroys many beneficial components, she says. "I really believe there's no need for fear with raw milk. It starts with healthy pasture, healthy goats and top hygiene in the dairy shed and cheese area." 🌱

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