

Grazing & Goats

Bakersfield woman will use grant to learn about dairying with goats

By CONOR BERRY
Messenger Staff Writer

BAKERSFIELD — Ever wonder what makes a dairy goat tick? Kristan Doolan hopes to find out.

Actually, Doolan, who grew up in Fletcher and now lives with husband, George, and two-year-old daughter, Zoe, on a hilltop goat farm here, won't be psychoanalyzing the ruminant mammals anytime soon. But she will be comparing two grazing systems to find what — if any — effect they have on a

goat's milk production and overall health.

Doolan recently received a \$3,700 grant from the Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) Farmer/Grower program, a U.S. Department of Agriculture initiative based at the University of Vermont that promotes sustainable agriculture projects.

Doolan plans to put the money to good use. If her research pans out, it will hopefully determine which grazing system produces healthier goats. Healthier goats produce more and higher quality milk. Better milk, in turn, means better goat

cheese, and so on. The study also will attempt to determine the amount of protein and butterfat produced by goats under different grazing systems.

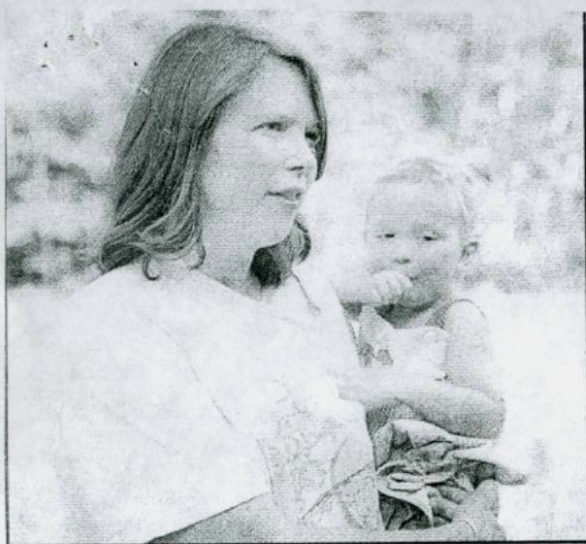
Ultimately, the goal is to help goat farmers employ better grazing practices for a healthier herd, thus reducing feed costs and increasing profitability.

Doolan, 31, and her husband, 30, are not your average Franklin County farmers. Each received a master's degree in sustainable agriculture from the University of Maine. And while Kristan hails from Fletcher farm country, George VanVlaanderen is from the urban plains of Manhattan. Doolan kept her maiden name for the sake of simplicity, she joked.

They have been managing goats for three years, and run an organic goat dairy farm from their 130-acre perch in the hill country of southern Bakersfield, just off Route 108. Doolan works full time on the farm; VanVlaanderen, a teacher at Bellows Free Academy-St. Albans, works on the farm only in the summer months. They hope to eventually make organic goat cheese production their bread and butter, so to speak.

Last season, they milked about a dozen does and made several types of farmstead cheese, including traditional goat cheese, a feta, and a real sharp variety. Their cheese is sold only at the Burlington Farmers' Market and the Onion River Co-Op in Burlington.

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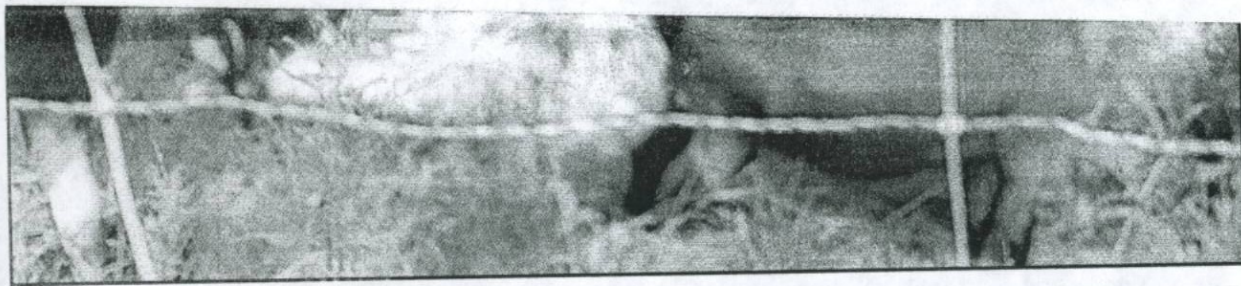


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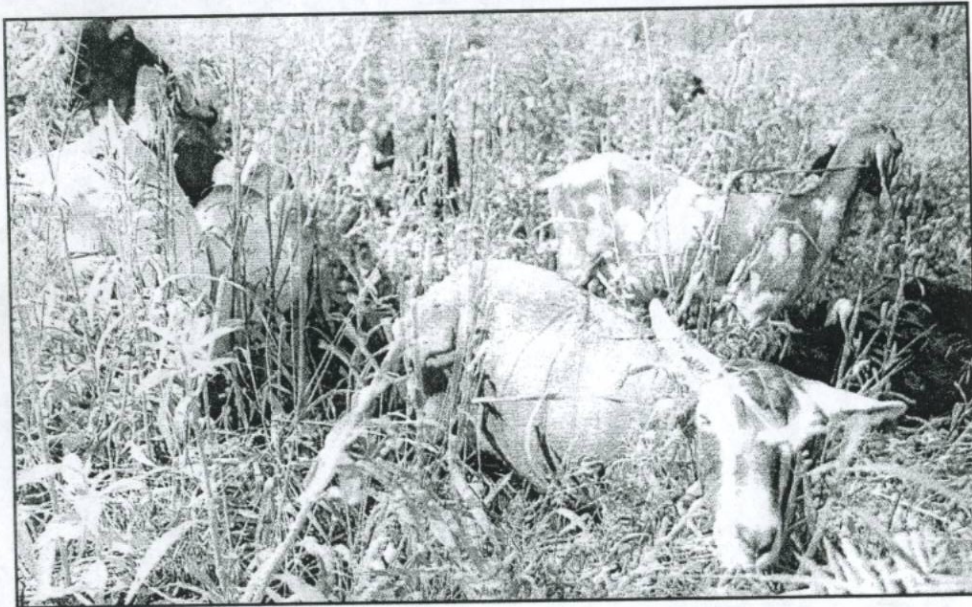


Kristan Doolan was recently awarded a grant to study goat grazing systems. She





Kristan Doolan was recently awarded a grant to study goat grazing systems. She is shown, top, at her Bakersfield farm with daughter, Zoe, 2, last week.



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"Vermont is really establishing itself in the cheese industry," Doolan said.

The couple hopes to soon be milking as many as 35 goats on 40 of their acres. The results of the study will greatly influence how that land is managed, said Doolan. For the last three years, grazing has taken place on pure grass, with some goats going off their feed, according to Doolan. As a result, milk production has declined in some of the goats.

Because goats are essentially

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"browsers," and not as well adapted to grass grazing as cows and sheep, the goal is to see if natural grazing is more advantageous. The latter allows goats to follow their instinctual feeding patterns – they tend to like brush and various types of plants and grasses – rather than limiting them to a grass diet.

Trying to recreate a natural grazing atmosphere has proven quite labor-intensive for Doolan and VanVlaanderen, however, requiring them to move a portable electric fence every 12 to 24 hours. Doolan said the study should indicate whether the extra work is worthwhile. If indeed simulating natural grazing translates into greater milk productivity, Doolan said she would probably install electric fencing throughout the brush areas of the farm.

Each of the couple's 35 goats has a name and a "unique personality," said Doolan. Not only do they know each of the animals' names, but even little Zoe

can tell them apart.

Of the grant-writing process, Doolan said it is fairly easy and straightforward. The one-year grant will pay for testing the goats' milk as well as some equipment, including "a fancy weed-whacker," said Doolan, which will come in handy to clear paddocks for electric fencing.

Helen Husher, a spokeswoman for SARE, said the program's annual grants are "very competitive." Nearly \$200,000 worth of research grants were recently awarded to northeastern dairy farmers, she said.

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