

A close-up photograph of a white ceramic bowl filled with a dark, rich soup. The soup is topped with a generous amount of fresh bean sprouts, several large, vibrant green basil leaves, and several slices of jalapeño peppers. The background is dark, making the ingredients stand out.

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Celebrating the Bounty of Rhode Island, Season by Season  
Spring 2009 • Number 9

GET YOUR GOAT  
GREAT GUAJILLO  
BELLYFUL  
SOWING SEEDS  
FISH ON YOUR DISH

Member Edible Communities

FROM THE EARTH  
BY LESLEY FREEMAN RIVA  
PHOTOS BY THAD RUSSELL

## GETTING YOUR GOAT

*On Small Farms, Meat Goats Get Good Grass Mileage*



thadrussell.com

Martha Neale is waist-deep in a huddle of lop-eared, Roman-nosed, fuzzy white Boer goats. The full-grown does crowd around, butting the bucket she holds in hopes of a fistful of grain. The splay-legged kids caper like, well, kids, tiny tails switching happily. Neale checks them over with an affectionate eye; she's nursed them through bouts of illness and cold weather, and readily points out her favorites. She's also very much hoping that you'll eat one for dinner sometime soon.

Here on this idyllic Jamestown farm, with sweeping views out over the salt marshes and the Newport Bridge arching into the distance, Martha and her husband, George, are building a herd of meat goats. They've run beef cattle on these 40 acres for decades, and sell their Windmist Farm grass-fed steaks and roasts at local farmers' markets. But cows eat almost as much as they are eaten; it takes a lot of room and a lot of good pasture to fatten a cow.

Goats, on the other hand, get good grass mileage: They're the low-impact Priuses of the animal world. Goats forage, rather than graze, happy to munch on indigestible tangles of brush, roots and weeds. That and their small stature make them perfect for small Rhode Island farms; you can support more goats per acre than either sheep or cattle, and they throw in the brush-clearing duties for free.

"Goats are supposed to be the next big thing," says Martha. She casts an affectionate eye on a long-necked llama peering over the fence, and three wild mustangs she's adopted through a government program, and adds ruefully: "And with all the pets around here that make no money, I was looking for a money-maker."

While dairy goats have long been a fixture in New England, prized for milk and cheese production, meat goats are a newer phenomenon. Americans have never had much of a taste for goat, but outside these borders goat is the most widely consumed meat in the world, closely followed by pork and chicken.

Goat meat is lean and high in protein. According to the USDA, 100 grams of goat has fewer calories, more protein and less fat and cholesterol than any other meat, including chicken. Combine those nutrient-rich properties with the animal's easy upkeep, and you understand why goat is a staple in countries from Mali to Morocco to Mexico.

And as immigrant communities throughout New England swell, home cooks have carried their taste for goat with them. Couple that with the general public's increasing interest in lean, grass-fed, humanely raised meat, and you have a demand for goat meat that has roughly doubled over the last 15 years, according to figures from the USDA and the Texas-based American Meat Goat Association. In fact, demand far outstrips supply—each year, says the USDA, the United States imports more than 600,000 frozen goat carcasses, mostly from Australia.

### Martha Neale with her Boer goats.

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Nationally, those figures have attracted notice. Well-known rancher and organic beef pioneer Bill Niman recently announced that he's launching a new line of grass-fed goat, to lure fans of his famous Niman Ranch beef and pork.

Here in Rhode Island, Fran and Joe Roukous of Lily Rose farm in Foster are aiming for a piece of that market. They currently have a small herd of about 40 meat goats on their wooded, rocky 100 acres, and would love to have at least three times as many.

They've owned the farm for some 16 years, and raise a variety of animals for both meat and breeding stock, including heritage breeds such as miniature Southdown sheep, as well as rabbits, guinea fowl, turkeys and chickens. Goats are a newer addition, and though they've had a rocky start, dealing with the high cost of feed and various health issues, the couple has high hopes.

"We can sell as many as we can raise," Joe says. "With Boston close by, and the ethnic communities we have here, the demand is there." In fact, the Roukous' client base reads like a UN roll call. "Last weekend we had a Jamaican man, a Nigerian and a Moroccan all come out to buy goats," Fran adds. "We get Italians, Africans...they all tell me about the different dishes they make."

Though there's no lack of buyers, local goat farmers do face some substantial difficulties, as both the Roukouses and the Neales can attest, starting with finding the right breed. The most common meat goat is the Boer goat, a large, muscular animal that packs more flesh per pound than its skinnier dairy cousins. Boer goats are originally from South Africa, and while they thrive in hot, dry climates like western Texas, which approximate their arid homeland, they have a tougher time in the humid summers and wet winters of southern New England.

"These goats have a terrible time with parasites here in soupy New England," says Martha Neale. Her fledgling herd was decimated by intestinal troubles (harmful to goats but not to humans) at the outset; she's gradually winnowed out the animals that had difficulty acclimating, and is now thinking of trying out some different breeds, such as Kiko, or Spanish crosses. The Roukouses have run into the same trouble.

They, too, have mostly Boer goats, with some Sonnen and Spanish crosses, and keeping them healthy has not been easy. But they also own a couple of Myotonic goats, which are native to the East Coast, and those have flourished. Also called Tennessee fainting goats (along with a host of other nicknames), the Myotonic goats are small, stocky and have one striking peculiarity: their legs freeze up in temporary paralysis when they are startled or excited. Pop a balloon in the middle of a Myotonic herd and every animal is liable to fall over in a stiff-legged, 10-second faint. "They're tough little guys," says Joe. "I'd love to have 100 more."

Even with healthy goats, there's another issue: the lack of nearby slaughter and processing facilities. Neale has grappled with this problem for years with her beef cattle; it's only recently that the Rhode Island

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Raised Livestock Association has worked out a deal to slaughter and butcher local animals at facilities in Johnston and Westerly.

But the costs are high, and for now Neale is simply selling off her live goats at auction. The Roukoues, too, have gotten around the problem by selling their goats on the hoof. Most goat consumers are interested in the entire carcass, so selling the animals whole is a workable solution—there's less of a need for fancy butchering skills if your customer wants a whole kid to roast. For those who don't fancy the do-it-yourself slaughter process, there are a few specialty butchers around the state who carry goat.

Armando & Sons Meat Market in Pawtucket is a major source for surrounding communities. "We go through at least 50 goats at Christmas, and then about 15 per week," says employee Jason Nieves. "People like the fresh whole goats, and then there's some African dishes that call for smoked goat, so we carry that, too." Central Meat Market in Providence, International Meat in Pawtucket and the Jerusalem Meat Market in Cranston are other popular outlets.

The Jerusalem Meat Market is one of the only halal butchers in the state, so much of the growing Rhode Island Muslim population passes through its doors. Owner Mohammed Nazir Hallak estimates he sells around 600 goats per year, with a spike around certain Muslim holidays: goat is the traditional dish to serve at the start of Ramadan, when the day's fasting is over, as well as to celebrate after the Hajj, the traditional pilgrimage to Mecca.

Locally, other big consumers of goat meat are Latinos, particularly Dominicans, who both roast and stew the animals; Italians, who often serve a roast kid around Christmas and Easter; immigrants from various African nations from Burundi to Mali, who consider roast goat a tradi-



## A TASTE OF SARDINIA

Pietro Senes, chef and co-owner of **Café Andiamo in Johnston**, grew up on a small farm in the Sardinian village of Sorso. His father raised goats and his mother had a traditional *latteria*, a dairy store selling eggs, milk and cheese. The rocky Sardinian hills seem to grow sheep and goats like Rhode Island shores grow clams; every field sports a shaggy herd, and the abundant milk is used to make the sheep and goat cheeses that are a central part of the local diet.

Senes was raised on those cheeses—"goat milk makes the best Ricotta in the world," he claims—as well as the rosemary-scented goat stews and tender roast kids that are common dishes. When he first came to Rhode Island, hired by a friend to make fresh Mozzarella for a Federal Hill store, he carried the memory of those flavors with him.

The cheese-making enterprise was short-lived but Senes was launched into the peripatetic life of a chef. He rolled dough at Caserta Pizza, made sausages at a local plant and worked at restaurants in Pennsylvania, Florida, California and Hawaii before returning to Rhode Island. He met his wife along the way, during a common stint at the now defunct Adesso in Providence, and together they opened the small Café Andiamo in Johnston almost six years ago.

tional party food; and Jamaicans and other Caribbeans. Goat curry with rice and peas is practically the Jamaican national dish, and Manish Water, a soup made from the head, feet and scrotum of a mature buck, is an island specialty.

So will goat cuts be showing up in your supermarket meat case anytime soon? According to Frank Pinkerton, USDA consultant, columnist for *Goat Rancher* magazine and author of the seminal pamphlet "So You Want to Do Meat Goats," marketers are exploring whether a change of name will help sell goat meat to the general public: *chevon* and *cabrito* may sound more appealing to folks than the naked *goat*, just as *pork* distances the chop slightly from the pig. Meanwhile, though it's long been a staple in local ethnic restaurants, goat is now popping up on upscale menus such as Persimmon in Bristol and Castle Hill Inn in Newport.

Back on Windmist Farm in Jamestown, Neale is hoping the trend continues. She's poured a lot of effort and affection into her small herd, and wants to see it flourishing and profitable. The bottom line, she says, is that goats and small New England farms are made for each other.

"Weeds and rocks are good for goats," she says, "and we've got plenty of those." eR

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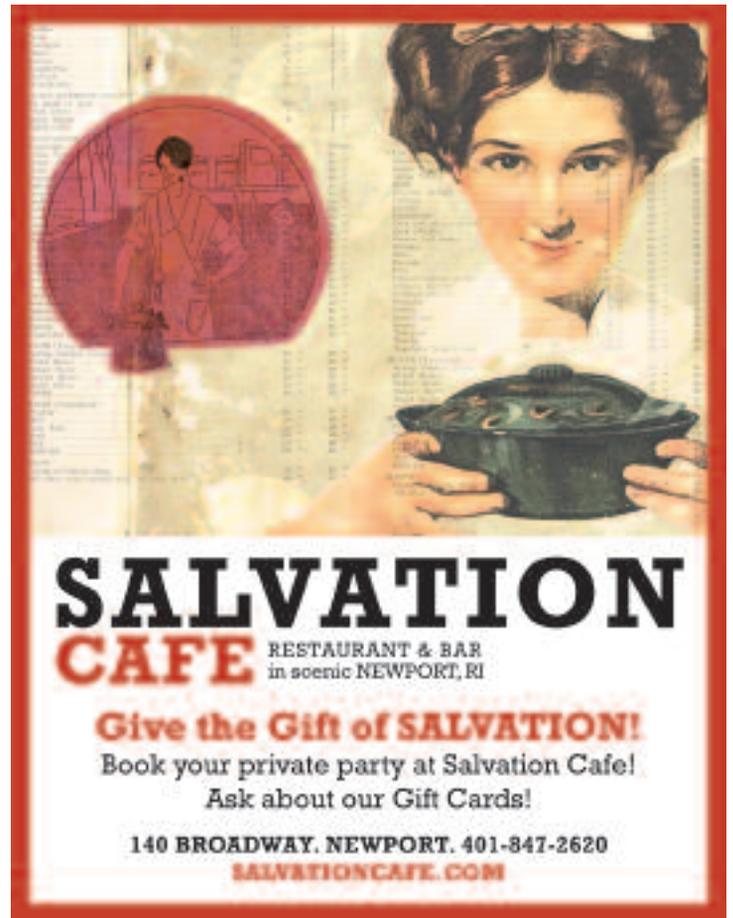
Lesley Riva writes frequently on food, travel and design. Her work has appeared in publications ranging from the *Wall Street Journal* to *Harper's Magazine* and *Cookie*.

From a modest lunch spot, the restaurant has steadily expanded in hours and ambition, and Senes now cooks hearty Italian fare for enthusiastic dinner crowds Tuesday through Sunday. And every Christmas and Easter, he makes a pilgrimage out to My Blue Heaven Farm in Burrillville, where he chooses from goats and kids to recreate the dishes of his youth for his family at home.

"I do everything, from A to Z," he says. "I butcher the animal, because I like to understand where it comes from, what it's been eating. Goat is very tasty, very flavorful. The meat is much more sweet than lamb. With the grown animals, I make a stew with potatoes, olives and tomatoes. With the baby kid, I roast it with herbs.

"A lot of things influence the taste of the goat meat: When they eat near the sea, the meat is firmer; when they eat in the mountains, the different pasture changes the flavor. You can tell when they have been eating wild grasses rather than hay. Americans miss out on all these tastes," he adds. "They like the filets, but they don't understand that real meat on the bone is more savory. But more Americans are coming around."

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