

'Little Switzerland' welcomes goat cheese dairy

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Staff Correspondent

BIRCH RIVER, W.Va. — Verena and Greg Sava moved to Nicholas county, West Virginia, 10 years ago. Soon after, the couple purchased a goat because they wanted to have their own milk, and their largely undeveloped woodlot and neglected farmland homestead did not have enough pasture then to support a cow.

Now, a generation (of goats) or so after the acquisition of "Barbara", their foundation doe, the Savas have a total of 24 goats, with 11 milking at present. And they're in the process of completing West Virginia's first-ever goat cheese dairy.

"First we just made it (the cheese) for ourselves," relates Verena Sava. Then, Greg's mother tried it, liked it, and wanted to buy some. And others tasted the hard cheese, which the Savas named Swiss Mountain, and liked it, and a steadily growing network of customers was formed.

Now the Savas make 1000 pounds yearly, not nearly enough to satisfy a growing demand for the

mild cheese. Swiss Mountain gets its name from the culture used in making it; the Savas obtained it from the mountain country of Switzerland.

The Savas make cheese once every six days. They had been doing ten gallons at a time, which makes one eight-pound wheel of cheese. but with their new building, soon they will be able to handle 100 gallons of milk at a time. Cheese production will remain at about the same level this year, but the Savas expect production to increase considerably in years to come.

Now the Savas are considering getting into the soft cheese-making business. After doing some market research, Greg Sava has concluded that Chevre, soft, cream-like cheese, is in demand locally by gourmet-type restaurants and similar clientele. Approximately two pounds of Chevre can be made from one gallon of goat's milk (twice the amount possible of hard cheese); and with the wholesale price of Chevre at \$5 a pound, a profit margin is definitely there.

"Our ultimate goal is to get

everything from the farm," says Greg. They are looking at the goat cheese business not as a way to become rich, but as a means to make a steady, comfortable income from their 160-acre hillside farm.

How will they accomplish this, with good breeding animals garnering \$500 to \$1000 a head? "What we're doing is cutting down on our outputs," explains Greg Sava. To this end, the Savas try to feed the best diet possible in order to minimize health problems.

"We're not trying to get huge amounts of milk," Verena Sava emphasizes, "but instead, we're concentrating on keeping a healthy animal."

Although it's somewhat the trend now to feed rather large amounts of grain to maximize production, the Savas stick mainly to high quality hay and their own pasture, which they are gradually improving. Verena explains: "We stay away from that (feeding lots of grain); in Switzerland, where I am from, you just don't have the grain." Perhaps West Virginia's other nickname, 'Little Switzerland' is quite appropriate in these circumstances; the Swiss forage utilization philosophy appears to work as well on the steep mountainsides of West Virginia to reduce costs for the Savas.

In another cost-reducing measure, Verena has returned to teaching (both she and her husband were teachers in upstate New York before settling in West Virginia) in order to pay for the construction of their new dairy, negating the expense of taking out a loan and making interest payments to a bank. The Savas also have a small sheep flock, a 1/4-acre PYO strawberry operation,

and Verena also sells bedding plants to augment their income.

The Sava's new dairy is a modest, chalet-style building made up of two sparkling-white rooms,

concrete floor, and heavily insulated walls and ceiling to maintain a steady room temperature of 68-70°F. With their new

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The Savas also raise Komondorok, Hungarian dogs bred to guard livestock.



Greg Sava demonstrates the docile nature of his herd buck, a purebred Nubian purchased in California.



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