

[Brandywine Table]

New Kids on the Cheese Block

EXPLORING THE SEASONS AND TASTES BEHIND LOCAL GOAT CHEESE

Alyssa Thayer

THE FIRST SIGNS OF SPRING ARE HERE: THE GROUNDHOG has shared his prediction, backyard bulbs are poking their heads up out of the ground, and local goat farmers, like Catherine and Al Renzi of **Yellow Springs Farm**, are in their busiest and most productive time of year.

For many Americans who are used to a year-round supply of cheese at the supermarket, the idea of cheese seasonality might seem odd. Lest we forget, since the original purpose of goat milk is to nurture baby goats (aka kids), it makes sense that the availability and properties of the milk are tied directly to annual breeding cycles.

Shorter, cooler days following the fall equinox spark fertility for goats and, with a gestation period of five months, “kidding season” falls in March and April. When asked about springtime on the farm, Catherine laughs and replies with one emphatic word, “Chaos!” And she’s not kidding (baby goat pun definitely intended). Given their herd size of 150, the Renzis can have up to five births in just one afternoon!

Catherine and Al are present at most of the births, name all the newborn kids and give them the best chance of success possible.



Yellow Spring Farm raises Nubian Goats, which are known for milk with high levels of butterfat. Originally from equatorial Africa, these goats have big ears to help keep them cool in warmer temperatures—and make them extra cute.



Catherine and Al Renzi are the owners of Yellow Springs Farm, a Native Plant Nursery and Artisanal Goat Cheese Dairy in Chester Springs.

Sometimes this can even mean welcoming the littlest newborns into their home for warmth and extra feedings. “We think of the goats as the most valuable employees on the farm. You can’t make good cheese without good goats,” Catherine says proudly.

During the spring, when the kids are born, milk production is most plentiful. Also during this time the goats transition from munching on dry hay to grazing on new spring grass. All these factors contribute to the fresh, herbal, fruity notes of spring cheeses. In summer and fall, milk yields lessen and become richer in taste and fat content.

While commercial cheese manufacturers strive for uniformity in taste and texture throughout the year, artisan cheesemakers like the Renzis work to accentuate these differences and create unique flavor profiles for each of their products.

Yellow Springs Farm’s deliciously diverse line of cheeses is made exclusively on their farm and ranges from mild brie-like cheeses to pungent cave-aged blues. The cheeses are crafted using age-old European techniques (from Italy and France) and avoid the use of stabilizers or artificial ingredients.

You can find Yellow Springs Farm cheeses online, at local specialty grocers and at the West Chester Growers Market from May through December. And if you’re interested in meeting the goats and learning more about the farm, check out the website and social media for upcoming Farm Days in May.



If any of the kids need extra attention, the Renzis may bring them into the house. “We have kids in the living room, bathtub and all around the house,” says Catherine.

Goat Cheese and Asparagus Quiche

Convene your brunch buddies and pour the mimosas, for this spring-inspired dish is a true gem. Feeling ambitious? Check out the recipe online for a DIY shredded potato crust.



- 1 large bunch of asparagus
 - 3 Tb. olive oil, divided
 - 1 tsp. salt
 - 1 tsp. pepper
 - ½ red onion finely chopped
 - 10 eggs
 - ½ C. milk
 - 2 tsp. finely chopped oregano (fresh or dried)
 - ½ tsp. thyme
 - 1 C. fresh goat cheese crumbled (recommend chèvre or Cloud Nine for more pungent flavor)
 - 2, 9" pie crusts, (if making from scratch, blind baking recommended. If store-bought, make according to directions.)
- * See online recipe for Potato Quiche Crust

Preheat oven to 400°. Cut off asparagus tips and place in a small bowl. Slice the rest of the asparagus stalks into small ¼" round pieces, leaving off any woody, fibrous parts at the end (generally the bottom 1–2 inches).

Drizzle 2 tsp. of the olive oil and a pinch of salt over asparagus tips and toss until fully coated. Place in a single layer (not crowded) on a cookie sheet and roast until the tips soften and get a slight char, approximately 10–15 minutes (depends greatly on the thickness of stalks). Remove from heat and reserve for later.

Turn oven down to 350°.

Meanwhile, saute onion in remaining olive oil over medium heat until translucent. Then add asparagus stems and continue to saute until tender and bright green (5–8 minutes). Let them cool slightly in pan.

In a larger bowl whisk eggs and milk together. Mix in herbs and cheese. Once asparagus stem and onion mixture has cooled slightly, stir into egg mixture.

Goat Primer

For many of us, our knowledge of goat cheese starts and stops at the 6-oz. log in the grocery store. But there's so much more to know and taste. Goat milk—like cow or sheep milk—can be made into all sorts of cheeses, including brie, blue, gouda and ricotta. Time to learn a bit more.

- **Better Bellies:** Goat milk products are considered by many to be easier to digest than cow milk counterparts. Goat milk properties are more similar to human milk in composition and structure and contain slightly less lactose.
- **Seasons of Flavor:** Weather and diet, as well as the point in the lactation cycle, all affect the goat milk supply and taste. These factors produce herbal, fruity cheeses in the spring and richer cheeses in fall and winter.
- **Find Your Type:** Determining which of three general categories a particular cheese is—fresh, soft-ripened, aged—depends on its taste, moisture content, age and treatment.

~ **Fresh:** Mild and tangy in taste, and creamy/crumby in texture. Made using acid to coagulate the milk. Maintains an extremely high moisture content, which makes it highly perishable. Has no rind and is often sold in plastic tubs. Ex: chèvre, feta, ricotta.

~ **Soft Ripened Cheese:** "Ripened" using mold and bacteria until the cheese develops a soft, white, "bloomy" rind, which is edible. Remains soft, creamy and sometimes even runny in the middle (since the cheeses ripen from the rind inward). Sold and kept in cheese or wax paper to let it breathe. Ex: Brie and Camembert.

~ **Aged Cheese:** Tends to have the most robust flavor, hardest texture and least water content, making it the least perishable. Aging times, along with the rind/taste/texture, differ greatly depending on the variety of cheese. A milder melty American-style cheese can be ready in just a few weeks, while certain Parmesans take up to a year to develop peak flavor.

Pour evenly into 2 prepared pie crusts and bake for 35–40 minutes (or until knife comes out clean). After 10 minutes in the oven, sprinkle roasted asparagus tips over top.

Let quiches sit and cool for at least 15–20 minutes before serving.

Serve warm or at room temperature.

Makes 2, 9" pies and serves 12–16.

Roasted Beet Salad

- 4 oz. fresh chèvre (recommend YSF Honey and Sage)
- ¼ C. plain bread crumbs
- ¼ C. walnuts
- 1 egg
- 2 beets
- Pinch of salt and pepper
- 4 sprigs fresh thyme (can use dried)
- Drizzle of extra virgin olive oil
- 1 lime, juiced and zested
- 1 orange, juiced
- 1 Tb. apple cider vinegar
- 1 tsp. honey

- 1 Tb. orange marmalade
- ⅓ C. extra virgin olive oil
- 3 C. mixed salad greens



For the Cheese Disks

Scoop out 5 portions of cheese and roll into equal sized balls.

In the small bowl of a food processor, process dried bread crumbs and walnuts, until most of the nuts are in fine pieces. Some larger chunks will remain.

Whisk the egg and put into a small shallow container. Gently place each ball into the container with a spoon or fork and roll to coat with egg. After each is "washed," place into the nut-crumb mixture and use a spoon to gently cover the cheese balls completely. Once the balls have a general coating, use your fingers to apply a small amount of pressure to ensure the mixture sticks to the cheese.

Place the balls in a plastic freezer bag. Gently press down on each cheese ball to make into more of a disk shape—about 2 inches in diameter.

Freeze for at least 2 hours (overnight is even better). Note: cheese disks must be fully frozen, or they'll make a mess when baking.

Save the remaining crumb mixture.

For the Roasted Beets

Preheat oven to 425°. Trim off beet tops and bottoms. Place the beets in the center of a piece of foil, drizzle with olive oil, sprinkle with salt and pepper and several thyme sprigs. Wrap the foil up around the beets to completely seal them, with no opening facing down (2 layers of foil recommended).

Roast in the oven at 425° for 90 minutes.

Remove and let sit until they're cool enough to handle. Peel the beets using a combination of a peeler and your fingers. Slice thinly into ¼-inch slices and set aside.

For the Vinaigrette:

Combine all ingredients (lime through olive oil) in a small bowl and whisk. This will be enough for leftovers. (You'll thank us later.)

To Assemble:

When ready to serve, preheat oven to 475°. Place frozen cheese disks on a baking sheet lined with Silpat or parchment paper. Lightly

Seasonal Sensations

Coming off the depths of winter, our palates are yearning for something bright and exciting. Try these Yellow Springs Farm favorites on a cheese plate, crumbled over a salad or in one of the beautiful recipes in this article.

• **Chèvre** – The most well-known goat cheese variety is creamy and tangy at the same time. Farm-fresh local chèvre lets you taste the subtle bright herbal notes from the season.

Pair it with: almost anything! Its bright flavor and smooth texture give it versatility. Roll in fresh herbs, top with oozy jam or crumble over salads and pasta.

• **Cloud Nine** – Creamy, soft French-style cheese with a soft, white rind much like a Brie.

Pair it with: fruity notes like berries, honey or a light pinot noir.

• **Black Diamond** – Also a soft-ripened cheese, it gets coated in vegetable ash as it ages. It's both creamy and complex in flavor. *Pair it with:* stone fruit or charcuterie. This style of cheese is originally from the Loire Valley where they also make Sancerre (similar to a Sauvignon Blanc) so this is a match made in heaven!

Craft a Crostini – Here's an easy way to make your taste buds jump for joy. Slather any of these three cheeses onto piece of toasted bread with a drizzle of local honey.



brush with olive oil, and bake 7–10 minutes on the top rack until golden and not quite oozing. Sprinkle remaining crumb mixture on the same tray and toast while the cheese is baking. (Start paying close attention after 6 minutes to ensure they don't melt out of their shape.)

Mix together the salad greens and toss with the vinaigrette. Plate the dressed salad. Top the salad with beet slices and warm goat cheese. Sprinkle with some of the toasted crumb mixture. Enjoy!

Serves 2.

Goat Cheese And Arugula Penne

Early spring is a tricky balance—the weather is starting to turn but is still stubbornly chilly. This dish fits the bill, serving us fresh veggies nestled into comforting warm pasta.

- 4 C. or 8 oz. penne pasta
- 5½ oz. fresh chèvre (recommend YSF Pepper and Garlic)
- 2 C. arugula



- 1 C. cherry tomatoes
- ¼ C. olive oil
- 2 Tb. lemon juice
- 2 tsp. minced garlic
- ½ Tb. salt
- ½ tsp. ground black pepper

Cook pasta in a large pot of boiling, salted water according to package or until al dente.

Crumble goat cheese into a large serving bowl. Add arugula, cherry tomatoes, olive oil, lemon juice, garlic, salt and pepper.

Drain pasta, and toss with goat cheese mixture.

Serves 3–4.

Goat Cheese Pesto

The taste of soft goat cheese is more present in this California version of pesto than Parmigiano-Reggiano is in its basil pesto counterpart. This is a Swiss Army knife kind of recipe: dip, sauce and spread.

- 4 oz. soft goat cheese, crumbled and at room temperature (recommend YSF chèvre or Cloud Nine)
- 1 C. packed flat-leaf parsley leaves (1–2 bunches)
- ½ C. packed fresh oregano leaves (1 bunch)
- 2 Tb. water
- 1 tsp. Dijon mustard
- ½ tsp. freshly ground pepper
- ¼ tsp. salt

Place all ingredients in a food processor, pulse a few times, then process until fairly smooth, or to the desired consistency, scraping down the sides occasionally.

Place at the center of a crudite platter, slather onto bread or sandwiches, or dollop generously as the base to a delicious flatbread. Enjoy! ♦

Alyssa Thayer found her love of food at an early age, frolicking around her mother's organic farm and eating her weight in berries and snap peas each summer. She is a self-proclaimed urban farm girl, whose mission is to bring inspired ideas to life, passionate people together, and good food to every table.



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