

CHEESE MATTERS

You've goat to be kidding

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Goats have been milked since nomadic times, probably providing the original base for most cheese making. The wide variety of cheese produced with goat's milk is some of the simplest but most interesting.

Yielding around three litres of milk per day, milking goats are inquisitive and intelligent creatures. Milked twice a day, they require a different milking arrangement to dairy cows given they have two teats rather than four. Cheese made from goat's milk is far more expensive to produce than cow's milk due to the lower yield and lower milk solids available in the milk. Ten litres of goat's milk will produce a kilogram of cheese. In Australia the milking breeds are predominately saanen (large white goats – best milkers), british alpine, toggenburg and anglo nubian (with the distinctive floppy ears). Goat milk production is very seasonal. Gestation occurs over winter for a period of around 150 days, milking at this time is at a minimum with precious energy going toward keeping warm and the unborn kid. Once kidding has occurred the milk is fast and furious, often referred to as 'spring milk flush'.

The fat globules in goat's milk are one-fifth the size of those in cow's milk, and the protein is more finely divided and more digestible. Many people who have problems drinking cow's milk find goat's milk far easier on their digestive system. Contrary to many myths, goat's milk contains lactose and is not low in fat; it is the structure of the milk that allows it to be used by some people who are allergic to cow's milk without adverse reactions.

With any food product fresh is best. This couldn't be more the case than with goat's milk. I have the luxury of milk that is just hours old. It is creamy and pure white. Goats produce milk with the yellow beta-Carotene converted directly into Vitamin A, it tends to have a distinct grassy aroma when very fresh.

The structure of goat milk is quite delicate and requires very careful handling as it has a tendency to taint easily. Therefore handling the milk during transportation, pumping and cheese making needs to be gentle. In addition, husbandry is critical, particularly when it comes to the buck. Allowing

the buck to roam the flock freely can cause the milk to have a 'goaty' taint as he marks his scent. As I understand it, the rule of thumb is one buck for every hundred does (females).

Goat cheeses that are overpowering have most likely been made with milk that has not been used at its freshest or that poor quality milk has been used. Due to careful husbandry and diets, musty old goat milk is now a thing of the past.

As a producer who makes both cow and goat milk cheese, it is the goat cheeses that are the most interesting, lending themselves to a great variety of applications. In particular, the lively acidic lactic cheeses (generally set overnight) have become increasingly popular in Australia. Cheesemakers have mastered the manufacture of these exceptionally delicate cheeses while Australian cheese lovers have embraced the complexities of these gastronomic treasures.

The very best goat milk cheeses are produced daily, with milk that is less than 24 hours old. We produce goat curd and chèvre three to four times a week to ensure it is always at its freshest. Some terms used when describing goat milk cheese we have become accustomed to are mostly French terms; Cabécou, meaning little goat; chèvre, the generic term used for cheese made from goat milk, meaning goat in French; caprini, meaning baby goat and tomme, meaning a wheel of cheese.

My Australian favourites are Holy Goat (La Luna), Meredith Dairy (Caprini), Woodside Cheese Wrights (Edith) or Yarra Valley Dairy (Le Jack), a smooth white mould cheese.

A wide variety of fresh chèvre is also available. Plain chèvre for crumbling into salads and for use in cooking or flavoured chèvres, which can be a simple offering on a cheese board with fresh seasonal fruits. Try figs with a harder style goat's cheese sometimes referred to as a Tomme de Chèvre.

There are of course many imported goat milk cheeses available too, but I would like to encourage trying Australian specialty cheese. There are so many different kinds of goat cheese available the world over, and I have only covered but a few. Most cheese styles that are made from cow's milk can also be made from goat's milk. Blues, washed rind, mixed milk, hard, hard, semi hard, soft ripened and soft fresh are but a few of the styles you may find in your cheese mongers cabinet.

