



THE RHYTHM OF THE GOAT

MEET YOUR MAKER

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FARMING IS A DIFFICULT BUSINESS, AND ORGANIC DAIRY FARMING DOUBLY SO. BUT TO FORMER TEACHERS CARLA MEURS AND ANN-MARIE MONDA IT OFFERS A LIFESTYLE LIKE NO OTHER.

Opposite page:
La Luna is one of Holy Goat's most awarded cheeses.

This page:
The welfare of their goats is one of Ann-Marie's and Carla's top priorities.

Carla and Ann-Marie were introduced to organic farming two decades ago, when they spent school holidays as Willing Workers on Organic Farms, or WWOOFers. The program allows 'city slickers' to trade labour for their keep, living and working alongside farmers to learn about permaculture, organic farming systems and biodynamics.

The experience was a life-changer. Carla and Ann-Marie quit teaching and for the next two years travelled throughout Australia and Europe, working on dairy goat farms and organic farms, soaking up everything they could learn about running their own farm, from soil health to pest control.

Their hands-on 'apprenticeship' over, the pair bought a 200-acre farm in Sutton Grange, near Castlemaine in Victoria.

"Being a farmer is the bravest thing you'd want to do. We were not born into farming, and we were not going to inherit a farm, so it was a big step," Carla said.

At least the decision of what animal to milk was an easy one.

"For us, it's always been goats and cheese. We find goats great to work with. They are intelligent and have so much personality. And they are about our size, so it's a very equal relationship. If you push them, they can push back," she laughed.

Equality means giving the goats the best of care, and for Carla and Ann-Marie that means organic farming practices.

"For Holy Goat to be all we wanted it to be, we had to go organic. We wanted to see how well we could take care of the animals and the land, to make high-quality product, to do everything we believed in."

"There are many challenges in farming. The organic framework stops you taking shortcuts. It means that when you're hitting a wall on an issue you can't just say, oh well, I'll just throw a bucket of something on it and fix it that way. You have to work through it, and that's a good thing. It's the core of what we do. We wouldn't make cheese otherwise."

A big part of Holy Goat's philosophy is respecting the natural lactation cycle of their 60-odd goats.

"We don't like to stimulate milk production in artificial ways and we don't buy milk from elsewhere when supplies are low," Carla said. "We follow the rhythm of the goat – in autumn and winter, when there isn't much milk, we won't be making much cheese."

"We think of cheese as preserving milk in a live form. When milk comes out of an animal, it's biologically alive. When you convert milk into cheese, it's transformed, but it's also a living product. It's a miracle, really. A gorgeous thing."

Holy Goat's speciality is cheese ripened by *Geotrichum candidum*, a natural mould that creates velvety curls on the surface of the cheese. Over the years, Carla and Ann-Marie have collected myriad awards, including the coveted President's Medal, awarded by the





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Royal Agricultural Society of NSW. The 'secret' to their success is in the care and attention the pair pay to their animals and their cheese.

"When we milk the goats, the milk only travels three metres to the dairy. Pasteurisation is the only process that uses a machine. We turn the cheese by hand, look at it every day. We even label by hand.

"The trick is to let the cheese do what it wants to do and avoid what it doesn't want to do. That's how you get there. Once the cheese gets going, it starts to affect the whole environment in the cheese room. It becomes easier and easier to make, and it gets better and better."

Previous page left to right:
The goats roam
Holy Goat's organic farm.

Carla Meurs shows off one of her milkers.

This page left to right:
Ann-Marie with a batch of Pandora,
A matured goat's cheese.

Black Silk is an ashed fresh chèvre.

There is only one kind of growth Carla and Ann-Marie are keen to see for their company.

"We don't want to increase our milk volume, production or herd size. In fact, if we can reduce our herd size because the goats are more productive, that's great.

"Our idea of growth is in quality – not just in our cheese, but in our land care, our breeding. We can also continue to grow in sustainability, in lowering our energy consumption, in keeping our workforce enthusiastic. And we can also grow in generosity – find ways in which we can be more generous in our community and share what our farm is about." ☀