

The Community VOICE

Tuesday June 19, 2012

Volume 20 Issue 20

[Home](#)[News](#)[Sports](#)[Real Estate](#)[Lifestyle](#)[Columns](#)[Community](#)[Classifieds](#)[Weather](#)

New local sheep cheese maven bound to succeed



Kathy (mom), Benny (newborn), Whoopi (standing by) and Seana Doughty - all proud!
Photo courtesy of Seana Doughty

By Linda Peterson June 9, 2010 11:31 pm

Seana Doughty, originally a southern Cal gal, is no shrinking violet - she sees something she wants, she goes after it.

No background in farming or cheesemaking? No problem! Starting her journey alone in 2008, Doughty and new partners, local sheep ranchers Rex and Kerry Williams, will most likely have a licensed dairy within the next two weeks with 70 ewes ready for milking.

How did this happen?

Doughty was a foodie early on - whipping up gourmet meals for her family on a regular basis. She kept her creative appetite in check until after college and several years working in an office.

Finally, her artistic energy could not be contained, Doughty left her day job and found the setting she needed with Venissimo Cheese Shop in Southern California (hired on the spot with no culinary

experience - but plenty of moxie). There, she could explore all things cheese and found sheep milk cheese rising to the top as her favorite.

Finding her way

Once Doughty realized she wanted to make her own cheese, she put herself through intensive cheese training - including (poor thing!) traveling to France and Spain, as well as visiting every sheep dairy in California. She knew finding enough land that she and her husband David could afford (plus the cooler climate dairy sheep need) in southern California was probably not possible, so they headed north.

In the beginning, Doughty was able to get milk from Marcia Barinaga of Barinaga Ranch, but she's making her own cheese and needs all her milk. Doughty realized she had three choices: stop making cheese, move to Wisconsin where there's plenty of sheep milk, or get her own flock and become shepherdess/cheesemaker. Doughty explains, "There was no option for me but to keep going. I wasn't going to just stop and say, 'oh well, I don't have anyone to sell me milk, I guess that's it.'"

Finding her flock

So, last December, Doughty and her sister went to Wisconsin (yes, in the dead of winter) to pick up her herd of 10 ewes - East Friesian and Lacaune dairy sheep.

Since the dairy sheep industry is only about 20 years old, it's not easy to find them. There are only about four or five sheep dairies in California - all in northern California except for one in San Luis Obispo (where Doughty learned how to milk sheep); thus the need for her cross-country trek to find the sheep that would be her flock.

A partnership develops

Once she had some sheep, Doughty put together a "wanted" poster that was a combination sheep/cheese credentials, pitch for land, housing, and potential partners and circulated it everywhere.

It was Kerry Williams of Williams Ranch (with 300 pastured Dorset sheep) who saw and answered Doughty's flyer in mid-February of this year. Williams and her husband Rex had been thinking about adding dairy sheep to their mix for some time. They clicked right away, and since the Williams don't want to make cheese, this is a perfect match. Doughty makes the cheese and the Williams, with over 13 years experience raising lambs for meat on 30 leased acres, will manage the dairy herd.

Business deal develops

Both couples have been putting plenty of sweat equity into turning an existing barn on their leased acreage, into a dairy. Because the property is already zoned for diverse agriculture, they save thousands of dollars in special use permit fees.

They'll use a portable bucket-milking system for now (often the case with start up operations), but hope next year to invest in bigger milking equipment. Once again, savvy businesswoman Doughty did her research and realized

SEARCH

Sports City
Indoor Soccer Centers
www.nbsportscity.com
707.526.2884
6700 Stony Point Rd., Cotati & 921 Piner Rd., SR

COMING SOON
TO THE GREEN MUSIC CENTER
LILA DOWNS
PART OF THE JAZZ
& WORLD MUSIC
SERIES
SUBSCRIPTIONS
ON SALE NOW
gmc.sonoma.edu
866-955-6040

it didn't make financial sense to build a dairy in an area that wasn't already properly zoned. The Williams and Doughty formed a business partnership and will file papers once their dairy is licensed.

This year, Doughty bought 50 more ewes from another rancher/cheesemaker Rebecca King of Monkeyflower Ranch, increasing her herd from 10 to 70 in less than a year. She hopes to buy 20 more in the near future from a ranch in Tennessee.

What is the vision going forward?

As you might expect, Doughty has big plans. One is a creamery cooperative. She's in conversation with other cheesemakers - some interested, some want to "go it alone." Interested parties so far include Craig Ramini - Ramini Mozzarella (the water buffalo rancher), Shana Davis - Epicurean Connection, and Doughty.

Doughty explains, "It doesn't make good business sense to build a creamery you're not using full time. It's like having restaurant open only three days a week six months out of the year. What other industry does that?" She says with cheese making, you only have to milk five or six months a year with sheep, and goats a little longer. Why not share? She figures the creamery cooperative process will take at least a year.

Even if it is just Doughty and Ramini, she says they'll move ahead, because it makes sense. She expects to keep her day job for another year or two. Doughty feels the cooperative environment allows for more learning and sharing. She and Ramini are adamant the creamery must be cleanly run, following strict rules; requirements for all coop members.

Where to locate a creamery?

Doughty's been watching Sebastopol's Barlow Center (former apple processing site) and plans to meet this week with the owner. She needs to be on sewer with city water, and her husband, David, is microbrewer and wants a space as well. She says there are too many hurdles with trying to do creamery on a farm.

Business plan

Doughty shares a little more of her business philosophy saying, "To be successful, I have to make money and be sustainable. How many pounds of cheese do I need to sell in a year to pay myself, feed my sheep and cover expenses? If you don't know that, you're done before you start. I may need to make a little more cheese than I want to make living. I've run the numbers and know how much milking/cheese making is required to make it work in California."

Who helps start-up dairy operations in California?

Doughty checked into USDA Value Added Producer funding through the Rural Development office and found out that grant money for equipment/infrastructure is very difficult to get. A feasibility study is required before asking for money to do the project. She could not get the help she needed from the state office, who offered to refer her to another state.

In Wisconsin, the unofficial cheese capital of the U.S., there are apparently plenty of free services to help dairy farmers be successful, which include how to get USDA funding. They have something called the Dairy Business Innovation Center - a non-profit that came out of a Value Added Dairy Initiative.

Doughty feels USDA money is not coming to California because there is no help for dairy people. As a grants administrator in her day job, she is very familiar with grants, and says, "If I'm deterred, I can imagine how hard it would be for a farmer. Where does that money go since it is not being used here? There's nobody to help figure out how to make this work."

Baaa, what about the cheese?

Doughty leases Bodega Artisan Cheese's creamery to make her handcrafted farmstead sheep milk "tommes" - a particular style of cheesemaking, which she calls Fat Bottom Girl. Currently using cow's milk, she expects her ewes will be ready for milking in the next couple weeks. She ages her cheese two to three months, and describes the flavor as a "toothsome bite and a touch of salt, conveying a subtle nutty and buttery goodness.

"Sheep milk is highly nutritious, richer in vitamins A, B, and E, calcium, phosphorus, potassium, and magnesium than cow's milk. It contains a higher proportion of short- and medium-chain fatty acids, which have recognized health benefits." (See www.sheep101.info/dairy.html.)

If you're unfamiliar with sheep milk cheese and think maybe you've never had any - think Roquefort, Feta, Ricotta, Pecorino Romano, and Manchego.

Doughty debuted her cheese at the Venissimo cheese shop where she was first inspired and encouraged to follow her dream.

Since then, she's added Cowgirl Creamery, the Cheese Shop in Healdsburg and a few venues in San Francisco. If you want her cheese in your town, talk to your local grocers! Web sites are www.bleatingheart.com, and www.williamsranches.com.

Clearly a lover of all things sheepish, Doughty smiles and says, "Sheep are versatile, giving us the most delicious milk, amazing meat, and wool!"

The Place to be to Improve Your Business

- Get access to over 50 Business Development lesson plans
- Participate in weekly conference calls/webinars
- Get the advice you need to improve your business

All this for \$67 per month

CBDC
California Business Development Center, Inc.
"Business Blueprint For Success"
info@CaliforniaBusinessDevelopment.com
(707) 584-4520

[Home](#) | [News](#) | [Sports](#) | [Lifestyle](#) | [Columns](#) | [Community](#) | [About Us](#) | [Contact](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)

Copyright © 2012 The Community Voice

Mailing Address: P.O. Box 2038 Rohnert Park, CA 94927 **Office:** 100 Professional Center Dr., Rohnert Park, 94928 **Phone:** 707-584-2222

Website Design by Techeffex