



## The *New* American Farmer

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### Mary Doerr, Dancing Winds Farm

Kenyon, Minnesota

#### Summary of Operation

- 36-goat dairy herd rotationally grazed on eight acres
- *Chevre*, soft-ripened cheese, low-salt feta
- Pasture and mixed alfalfa hay on some 10 acres
- Bed & breakfast “educational farm retreat”

#### Problem Addressed

***Inadequate labor:*** Mary Doerr’s goat cheese found such a ready market in the food co-ops, restaurants and farmers markets of the Twin Cities area that the operation grew to a level she — and the farm itself — could no longer handle. She took a year off and returned to scale back the dairy, develop part of her house as a farm guest retreat and create more balance in her life.

#### Background

Mary Doerr’s 20-acre farm is located in rolling, fertile farmland about an hour south of the Twin Cities. When she and a partner first bought the farm in 1986, their original vision was to raise organic vegetables and fruit. A few months after their arrival, Doerr acquired three pregnant goats. The goats, called does, gave birth, or “kidded” the following May. Doerr soon realized that they needed to learn to do something with the considerable quantity of milk besides drink it. She and her partner began making cheese.

Doerr says the name she chose for the farm, “Dancing Winds Farm,” reflects her desire to find a friendly and congenial spirit, like the frolic and play of happy goats, in the almost constant winds of the open prairie.

#### Focal Point of Operation — Scaling back and adding value

Doerr first learned how to make fresh chevre by reading books on cheesemaking and by trial and error. “I fed a lot of mistakes to the pigs” that she raised in some years for her own consumption, “but I gradually worked out how to produce commercial quantities of a cheese I liked.”

She took a sample to the co-op distributor who was buying some of their vegetables. The buyer liked the cheese and offered to take all they could make.

The following spring, a barn fire nearly wiped out the young operation. They rebuilt, replacing the old three-story, 60 by 100-foot barn with a smaller barn more suitable for goats, along with a cheese room. As they had been advised, they involved their dairy inspector in the design process.

“We got both good advice and a more efficient approval process,” Doerr says. They received a Grade A dairy license. The high sanitation grade — required for fluid milk but not cheese-making — turned out to be good for marketing.

They took advantage of bargain-basement prices for used equipment they found after corporations or developers bought out small dairy farms. “There was lots of good stainless steel equipment going for a song,” Doerr says. “We bought vat pasteurizers, a bulk tank, sinks and counters. We were able to outfit the cheese room for a miniscule amount.”

She further pursued her education as a cheesemaker by visiting a goat cheese dairy in Wisconsin, and by taking Wisconsin’s intensive, five-day cheese-making licensing class, even though Minnesota had no licensing requirement. The barn was finished in June, the operation was up and running in August, and by December 1987, the kinks were out. The cheese made its debut on the market.

By 1992, Dancing Winds Farm was selling chevre to all 14 Twin Cities food co-ops, eight restaurants and both Twin Cities farmers markets. The partnership had dissolved and Doerr was now a sole proprietor with eight part-time helpers. They were milking 38 goats and making 400 pounds of

cheese a week in the 20 feet by 20 feet cheese room. They were milking year-round and buying half the milk they needed off the farm.

“By the fall of 1994, I was burned out,” Doerr recalls. “I questioned the quality of life, becoming a slave to a crazy schedule.”

She also questioned the environmental impacts of producing that much. The operation needed to dispose of whey, a natural byproduct heavy with nutrients. When she was producing a lot of cheese, the quantity of whey became too much to land-spread or feed to the pigs. Doerr also was concerned about the quality of the milk she bought off-farm.

Doerr took a year’s sabbatical in 1995 to reassess the business. She stopped breeding the goats and had two people take care of the herd while she traveled and tried to figure out what she wanted. She also worked in a bakery and fixed up the part of the house that would eventually become the bed-and-breakfast’s guest quarters. The original homestead of a quarter section of

land, the farm included a picturesque, many-gabled house, built in 1896 with additions in 1910 and 1930.

After that year, “I realized that being my own boss still appealed to me, that I loved goats and enjoyed making cheese, but the size had gotten out of scale,” she says.

She sold off part of the herd, holding on to her 12 best does. She decided she would only sell direct to consumers and through just one farmers market. She switched to seasonal milking. She stopped buying milk and was able to recycle the reduced quantities of whey by feeding it to the pigs or spreading it on the pasture.

#### Economics and Profitability

Scaling back has not reduced the operation’s profitability. “Selling direct is a win-win situation for both you and the consumer, as well as a satisfying relationship,” Doerr says. “I had been wholesaling for \$4 a pound, but I could retail for \$16 a pound. I could make more money making 100 pounds a week than I had on 400 pounds, because I wasn’t buying milk.”

Seasonal milking also made economic sense because winter production is both more expensive and more likely to promote udder complications. Specialty cheese sales slack off after New Year’s Day and pick up again at Valentine’s Day. Now she milks to just before Christmas, kids the first week or two of March, then makes cheese April through December. This schedule allows her to undertake international projects for Land o’ Lakes, giving her both supplemental income and more balance in her life.

As she scaled back the dairy, the new “educational farm retreat,” as the state of Minnesota calls it, was taking shape. She returned it to its original state, which was a two-family house, with one half as a guest



*Mary Doerr produces cheese from goats raised in a 21-paddock management intensive grazing system.*

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quarters. The change created another opportunity to add value to existing resources — bringing guests willing to pay to stay at a working farm.

For its first three years, the guesthouse operated at a loss. Now, she is finishing the last capital improvement in her plan — a picturesque farm pond. The operation is hitting its stride and beginning to provide significant income. Doerr charges \$289 for a two-night weekend stay, usually to young families. In 2000, she rented the quarters for 180 nights, and even turned away a few would-be guests when she wanted a break from hosting duties. Doerr always provides breakfast featuring milk and cheese from the farm, and eggs, preserves and bread from neighboring farms.

“They can be as private or as sociable as they please,” Doerr says of her guests. “They can become involved in farm activities if they want to and have a peaceful experience in the country on a pleasant farm.”

### Environmental Benefits

The farm has much to show in terms of sustainable production. Her 10-acre hay field, originally planted in alfalfa, now contains a mix of other plants as well. Bluegrass, quack grass and timothy have crept in; rye, birds-foot trefoil and clover have been interseeded. Doerr’s fields have been in continuous forage for 12 years, with only one disking in 1993 to put in oats and a pasture mix.

“My neighbors would say it is time to plow it up,” Doerr says, “but the organic matter is still very high, and it’s producing quality forage, with diversity and a minimum of compaction.”

In the pasture she practices rotational grazing, an ideal system for goats. She has 21 very small paddocks divided with electro-netting, and rotates the animals daily in a

three-week rotation. “They want diversity of forage, though you can get great production on straight alfalfa,” she says. “They actually like thistles and cocklebur!”

Her farmland could be certified as organic, but the feed she currently uses is not organic. In the early years, she was able to acquire organic grain, but lost her storage facilities when the local feed dealership changed hands. Recently acquiring a bulk bin now makes creating and storing a custom mix a possibility.

Her veterinary care emphasizes natural remedies and limited use of antibiotics. She strengthens the goats’ immune systems with vitamin therapies and gives antibiotics only for high fevers and life-threatening illnesses. For 10 years, she was able to control internal parasites with natural wormers, garlic oil capsules and wormwood powder, testing the herd each spring. In the last few years, as the worm load has increased, she has had to turn to chemical wormers. She now tests and worms the does as needed, perhaps twice a year.

### Community and Quality of Life Benefits

Doerr is finding increasing satisfaction in her role as host and a gentle spokesperson for sustainable agriculture. Her “educational farm retreat” is a perfect opportunity to both show and tell her visitors, often from non-farming backgrounds, what sustainable agriculture is about. By buying and featuring products from local producers at the guest quarters, she introduces non-farmers to local agriculture.

After 15 years in operation, she also has something to show her farming neighbors and visitors, including the overseas producers she occasionally hosts for Land o’Lakes.

“My neighbors go out of their way to tell me they are using less chemicals now,” she says.

“Like me, they are trying to get to a less costly way of farming.”

### Transition Advice

Producers wanting to try alternatives should be prepared to buck the status quo, Doerr says. They may get some strange stares from their neighbors, but the uniqueness of a new venture will likely pay off.

“There’s a strong community pressure to have your farm look a certain way — you’re not a successful farmer unless you have clean fields and the newest equipment,” Doerr says. “Look at the options, and let new ideas in. You have to break away from the pack somehow.”

She has a message for new farmers as well: “Start small, and, if at all possible, apprentice in many different types of farms before you start. I got into this too fast. It takes some discipline to take it slow, but you’re better off in the long run.”

### The Future

As she looks to the future, Doerr continues to seek balance in her life. She’d like to concentrate on the bed-and-breakfast and on making the soft-ripened cheese, but let go of some of the physical work of farming.

Her operation will remain “holistic,” with every piece important to the whole. For example, the guesthouse wouldn’t be nearly as successful if the farm were not a genuine working dairy.

■ *Deborah Wechsler*

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