

# Great-tasting goat meat starts with welfare

The goats at Bere Marsh Farm are happy beasts - and that's the most-important factor affecting the flavour of their meat, says farmer **Fiona Gerardin**



Fiona Gerardin at Bere Marsh Farm with one of her organically reared goats: "Happy animals raised with lots of care make tasty meat, so welfare is the most important thing for me." Photograph: Simon Keitch for the Guardian

## Interview by Sue Quinn

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I was brought up on this 80-acre farm in north Dorset, which used to be part of a larger dairy farm. Having converted to organic, I was selling eggs in a small way as well as a few turkeys and geese for Christmas, but was looking to start a small livestock enterprise. I'd seen plenty of farmers producing organic goat's milk products, but no one was selling organic kid or goat meat. So, in 2010, I took delivery of three in-kid Cashmere-Boer goats with the idea of starting a meat business.

The meat is called *capretto* or *cabrito*, produced from kids 6-8 months old. Goat meat is a niche market that's becoming more popular. It's healthy, low-cholesterol, and very tender and lean, and can be cooked like lamb or venison. Happy animals raised with minimum stress and lots of care make tasty meat, so welfare is the most important thing for me.

I spend a lot of time with the goats, observing and learning when they are content or

unhappy. They're not as hardy as sheep, and have to be housed at night in wet or damp weather and let out to graze in the day in the spring and early summer. In the winter, they're fed our own organic hay made on the farm as well as organic coarse mix from a local feed merchant.

The Boer goat is bred specifically to produce meat and we keep a pure Boer billy goat on the farm, which we change every two years. I keep a closed herd, using only homebred females to breed from and only homebred animals for meat production. Kidding takes place at the beginning of March indoors - safe from the weather and predators. Twins and triplets are usually born and are left with their mothers until 4 or 5 months old, by which time they are almost naturally weaned.

We have a bridleway running through the farm and quite often people enquire if they can buy the meat after seeing the kids happily growing in the fields. They appreciate the way the animals have been raised. I've never had any problem marketing or selling the meat, and we always sell out. I sell the meat directly from the farm - I like that customers can collect their meat as soon as it's butchered - but we also send by overnight courier.

Social media is very important to the business. I tweet daily via @BereMarshFarm about life on the farm, and post pictures of the goats on our Facebook page . About one-quarter of the meat orders come from social media and the rest is word of mouth.

I plan to increase the herd to 100 breeding females, which will give us about 200 kids a year to sell for meat, the maximum I feel that I could manage and the farm would support. We now have 69 of them including this year's batch of kids.

They're delightful and intelligent animals, but they have a penchant for escaping. After four years I have almost learnt how to keep them in a field!

*beremarshfarm.co.uk*

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