

***Goat Song: A Seasonal Life, a Short History of Herding, and the Art of Making Cheese*, by Brad Kessler**

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By Susan Ager

Before I read "Goat Song: A Seasonal Life, a Short History of Herding, and the Art of Making Cheese," goats meant nothing to me. I liked the cheese their milk made. But I dismissed them as dirty, smelly, nosy and horny.

Brad Kessler has (mostly) persuaded me otherwise. This is an elegy to goats, whose milk humans have consumed much longer than cows', who were our first domesticated companions after dogs, and whose ways significantly shaped our alphabet and our language. Even "tragedy" is from the Greek for the cry of a goat.

Kessler and his wife, Dona, take in goats for the sole purpose of stealing their milk for cheese -- "kidnapping," he jokes. But the Vermont-based writer pays high honor to his creatures and the herding tradition. One portion of the book is daily journal entries about the routine motions of milking and cheesemaking, and the musings that spring from them. Those pages read like prayers.

"I tend to believe," he writes, "in Gandhi's prescription; that one's own bread labor -- labor that is not for hire, that doesn't turn into a commodity but feeds you -- can enrich one's life and lead to a kind of liberation. ... Maybe it's just the routine, the same objects in the same place (the wipes, the teat dip, the feed bucket, the scoop). The smallest change upsets the balance, and the repetition builds a kind of faith."

Every page of this memoir promises to deliver -- and usually does -- lyrical and/or potent insights into the pastoral life. A new kid the couple acquires is "eggplant black with a buttery undercarriage -- she looked like an Italian loafer." On the evening their first ewe gave birth, "We peeled each new ear open as if they were unread letters."

But for the randy side of goats, do not miss the chapter called "Service," which describes what the Kesslers (and their does) get from a friend's horny bucks in exchange for \$35. It dissuaded me from changing careers, homemade cheese notwithstanding. Mozzarella. Ricotta. Cottage cheese. Sprinkled with salt and pepper or fresh-plucked herbs. Yum!

But cheesemaking is tedious, too. One chapter describes the process of making a tomme, an aged cheese. It begins with the chauffeage (heating of milk), continues through several hours of curdling

and draining and cutting and waiting and turning and salting, and then waiting for months until finally the wheel is cut and a slice sacramentally laid on the tongue.

"The interior was ivory -- the color of old piano keys," he writes. "The eyelets were small and well formed and the taste surprisingly good -- herbal, savory, redolent of a freshly scythed meadow."

Any book that takes us to such a taste, and such a place, is nourishment.

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