

THE BOER GOAT

Looks, personality and great meat!

At the start of her own Boer goat enterprise, **Jack Smellie** talks to several existing producers and explains why Boers and their meat have so much to offer, as well as gaining valuable advice for newbies such as herself.....



Goat kids love to play and climb, AND pose!

After seven years of dairy goat keeping and making cheese, we decided to add a couple of Boer goats to our mix and start to raise our own goat meat. In the May/June edition, we described the heartache that occurred when we had to cull/sell on our dairy goats but also the success of our first year of Boer breeding when each of our two nannies had triplets!!!

Going from three to nine goats in the space of 48 hours was rather humbling. Our first set of triplets gave us a 2:1 ratio in favour of girls and then the next set were all boys, but as we were starting a mini goat meat enterprise, maybe this was not such a bad thing. Whatever the numbers though, having kids around again after a gap of two years (we had not bred in 2016 due to our move), was a fabulous reminder,

should one be needed, as to how much we love our goats!

Our Boers are seriously chilled animals and generally very biddable, most other producers we have spoken to, many with much larger numbers, say the same.

Did you know that goats were one of the first animals to be domesticated and that in the wild, the top goat is a female but she will have a male 'deputy' who will often go on ahead to find places to eat and sleep or rest? Did you also know that goat meat is the most widely eaten meat in the world, but then with a population of over 850 million goats, this is perhaps no wonder? The Boer goat has its origins in South Africa where it has been bred specifically for meat. The name is derived from the Afrikaans (Dutch)

word 'Boer' meaning farmer. The Boer goat has a shorter lactation period than the dairy breeds and a faster growth rate, reaching 40-50kgs or more in as little as five months, although most producers like to see their animals get to at least six months before slaughter.

The rise of goat meat...

In this country, goat meat IS now gaining in popularity and goat keepers should be applauded for helping 'Joe Public' realise that there is a lot more to goat meat than a 'goat curry', although there is still a way to go on this: all the producers we spoke to who offered specific cuts, told us that 'diced' goat meat is still their most popular sale!!

Two of the leading weight watching/diet organisations now advocate goat meat as part of dietary control as it has



Communal feeding, but always best to keep an eye



Boer goats are seriously very handsome

far less fat than chicken and pork but more protein than beef. It also contains significantly less cholesterol. If the NHS promoted meat eating, goat should surely be at the top of their list!!

A reminder that this article is about the Boer goat! Some of the leading goat meat suppliers in this country use (unwanted) males from the dairy industry. Two recent media splashes: an article in the Daily Mail and an item on Countryfile profiled two such suppliers and whilst such national coverage of 'the goat meat industry' is great, there is still a need to raise the profile of the Boer goat as the perfect meat animal. The Boer Goat Society exists to do just this and there is now a 'Meat

Certificate' that can be applied to Boer goat (an initiative promoted by Avril Wooster of Northlew Boer Goats) so that a customer will know it is 'Boer' goat meat they are eating not just goat meat (similar to Dexter beef, GOS pigs etc etc).

Starting out

So, how easy is it to set up a Boer meat herd? Over the last few weeks, we have spoken to several producers up and down the country and heard a variety of practices, successes and tips. There were two huge commonalities that come across loud and clear: firstly, the Boer goat itself is highly addictive, virtually all the producers we

spoke to talked very fondly of the Boer character, the ease of breeding and mothering and many were continuing to increase their numbers. Secondly, in answer to the question: how easy is it to sell the meat, the answer was always a resounding 'very'. That is not to underestimate the work that goes into marketing and sales but across the board producers felt there was a definite appetite for the meat but what was lacking was an understanding and awareness of what to do with it. Some producers supplied pubs and restaurants that provided goat meat dishes as a niche market meat but in terms of goat meat being a mainstream product, there is a fair way to go yet!!



Waiting for breakfast, with an audience



Goat relationships are very close



Goats do graze as well as browse, especially if the grass is lush

Sourcing stock

It is possible to buy percentage female Boer Goats, e.g. 50% (half Boer, half dairy) and then using a 100% male, breed up (e.g. a 50% female and a 100% male will produce 75% kids). For anyone starting off says both Holly Purdey from Brendon Hill Meats and Katrina Gowing from Netta Goats, this could be a great way to begin as a) it will be cheaper to buy your starting stock and b) it means you can breed up for the character and looks that YOU want. Obviously this becomes a long term project rather than having an instant herd of 100% stock from which you can produce your own pure Boer carcasses in the first year, (although of course you have the option of deliberately using these crossbreeds for meat and benefiting from the hybrid vigour...).

One problem that is common across many livestock breeds however, is the restricted gene pool, meaning care is needed when it comes to breeding. In our own mini herd, our billy and one of our nannies share a grandfather. The genetics guru at the Boer Goat Society checked back for us and decided this was okay. Avril Wooster works hard to widen the gene pool through sourcing stock from all over the world, including embryo transfers. Katrina Gowing successfully raised embryo transfer kids this year. There are a fair few Boer breeders up and down the country now but it is imperative to know what lines/genes you are buying into.

Feeding

There was universal agreement that it costs a fair bit to keep a Boer goat. Unless you have acres and acres of all-year round browsing, your goats will need to be given concentrates once or twice a day for much of the year. Many producers feed a calf mix which is cheaper than a bespoke goat mix and often has a higher protein (18%) which,



“ All goats are susceptible to high worm burdens and Boer goats are no different. ”

when it comes to raising meat kids, can be viewed as a good thing. Several producers we spoke to however aim for 'pasture-fed' meat and as such get mum and kids outside onto lush spring grass as soon as they can. Pasture-fed has a universal appeal in today's worrying times of over-use of antibiotics and indoor reared meat and there is every reason why goat meat should be marketed in this way, the same as other meats such as lamb and beef. This goes hand in hand with natural weaning; meaning kids and nannies can spend all summer outside together.

This is a system adopted by Fiona Gerardin of Bere Marsh Goats who says it has the added bonus of making herd management very easy: not having to separate mums and kids and so run two herds! It does mean of course that male kids have to be castrated.

Health

All goats are susceptible to high worm burdens and Boer goats are no different. Practice can vary hugely but taking faecal egg counts (FECs) and working closely with your vet as to which type of wormer to use is, in our

opinion, a must. Jacqui Pateman-Jones from Poole Batten Farm does just this. Her vet offers a very reasonable smallholder FEC scheme where for a one-off annual payment, they will do as many FECs as you need and crucially, give advice based on the results. Several produces we spoke to pay into various health accreditation schemes for such diseases as CAE, CLA and Johnne's. This means only sourcing stock from other accredited herds and operating strict bio-security measures. The extra monies required to operate such schemes does mean that kids from such herds can command a higher price. In addition, it is a requirement in several countries to be part of such schemes, for the purposes of importing and exporting semen/embryos/live animals. Most producers we spoke to vaccinate their goats against the clostridial diseases (lamb dysentery, struck, pulpy kidney and tetanus) and some routinely medicate against coccidiosis which in kids, as in lambs, can at worst be fatal if not caught early enough and at best, affect growth.

As with raising any meat animal, it is crucial to be aware of withdrawal periods for any medication given. On the whole though, the producers we spoke to were not in favour of putting drugs into their animals unnecessarily - something we found highly encouraging in the world of raising meat!

Field to Fork

Most producers we spoke to send their goat kids to the abattoir at around 6/7 months when the kids have reached 40kg. Carcasses are usually hung for

a couple of days and then with any luck, the amount of meat that comes back is just over half of the live weight, i.e. around 22/23kilos. Jacqui from Poole Batten keeps her goats till they are 12-18 months old, getting double the live weight and a richer and more flavoursome tasting meat. Her reasons for doing this are pure and simple: to give the animal a slightly longer life!!!

There was a huge range of ideas and practise when it came to how individual producers sell their meat with a common starting point being 'friends and family' before word spread and demand was in danger of outstripping supply. Trudie Thomas of Ritoweg Farm does a little bit of everything from farmers' markets to pubs, from farm gate to via her own butcher. The markets are a commitment but she enjoys them because of the direct contact with her customers and the satisfaction of securing those 'repeat orders: vital for any business. Social media can play a major role, though for most, it was only a small part of their marketing success. For Fiona at Bere Marsh it was an article in the Guardian that really kick-started her selling. Holly, at Brendon Hill Meats, although a relatively new producer, only slaughters when she has the orders, thus guaranteeing a return.

Some producers sell individual cuts, others only sell in ¼ or ½ animals, often using box schemes and postal orders. Despite thinking to the contrary, the 'red tape' part of the selling was, according to most of the produces we spoke to, pretty straightforward. One of the easiest ways to get the meat to customers and avoid virtually all red

tape is to secure your orders and then get the butcher to cut, pack and send. That way, once the live animal has left your smallholding/farm, other than providing the butcher with the address labels and cut requirements, your job is done!!! Providing recipes for your customers was a top tip from Trudie (and others).

High welfare and a trusting relationship

At the first meeting of the newly formed Devon and Cornwall Boer Goats, we discussed the similarities between raising kids and lambs: spring-born, autumn slaughter, milk and pasture-fed, similar health issues. The major difference is the animal itself: goats generally seem more inclined to bond with their human owners, they are also higher maintenance (hate the rain, need shelter, need regular feet trimming) which probably enhances this bonding! Most of the producers we spoke to seemed to feel this difference very keenly and operate very high welfare standards because of it. With Boer goats there is something about their trust in you that makes you want to give them the best possible life!! **SH**

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- Katrina Gowing: www.nettagoats.co.uk
- Jacqui Pateman-Jones: 07793583088
- Holly Purdey: www.brendonhillmeats.com
- Trudie Thomas: www.ritowegfarm.co.uk
- Avril Wooster: www.britishboergoats.co.uk

Also see: www.devonandcornwallboergoats.co.uk and www.britishboergoatsociety.co.uk

