



# *A* **DAIRY** *Tale*

**THE THURMAN FARM  
WHERE CREATURES LIVE  
HAPPILY EVER AFTER**

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# A PLANK CARVED WITH THE WORDS "JERSEY SHORE"

was nailed to a gated pen in the gambrel-roof barn. A gathering of old souls snuggled in fresh hay, seeking shade on a hot summer day.

"This is where our retirees live," said Lorraine Lambiase, a short, 62-year-old farmer wearing barn boots and a black Nettle Meadow T-shirt.

"Why Jersey Shore?" I asked.

"I'm originally from Hoboken."

The rust red barn, built for draft horses in 1903, is the second-oldest structure at Nettle Meadow Goat Farm and Cheese Company, in the town of Thurman in western Warren County and a world away from North Jersey. The property dates to the late 18th century, when the woodland was first cleared for farming in a wilderness area defined by Crane Mountain and the boulder-strewn tributaries of the Hudson River. Leading into this glen from Route 8, houses visible from the winding road sat next to stacks of firewood and pickup trucks plastered with NRA bumper stickers. Chain-saw black bears squatted on lawns. Maple sugar houses and a turkey farm lay over the next hill. "Don't Tread on Me" flags, faded Trump slogans, VFW halls festooned with true blue bunting—the southern Adirondacks wearing politics on its sleeve. An odd place, perhaps, to find two aging pacifists who have "Lady Liberty is Crying, End the Madness, Stop the Hate" scrawled on the back windshield of their van.

We walked through the barn to inspect the "bachelor pad," where rams and bucks hang out when not in service, and paused at a stall occupied by a woolly black llama with gorgeous lashes. Foonzie gave us a wicked side-eye. The sign on his gate read: "Caution. I am not friendly. I may spit and bite." Lambiase explained he has "berserk male syndrome," but she and her partner, cheesemaker Sheila Flanagan, still raised him from birth.



A black-and-white barn cat calmly licked itself and then erupted in a hacking cough.

"You OK, Willard?" asked Lambiase. "You going to hurl? You ate another chipmunk?"

Feline nature, red in tooth and claw.

For the past 12 years, Nettle Meadow has been home to the Joseph F. Kemp Memorial Animal Sanctuary for abandoned and retired farm animals, presently including a trio of miniature horses, a Vietnamese potbellied pig named Hamilton, and a rescue turkey that thinks she's a goat. Not just because the farmers have a soft spot for their livestock—the refuge is part of a greater life-cycle mission at this 50-acre Adirondack cheese processing plant, respecting animals from first breath to the last, often long past their working years. Strays might be adopted from down the road, or in the potbellied pig's case, liberated from an apartment in Queensbury.

Lambiase led me to a triangular pen at the center of the barnyard.

"This is Assisted Living," she said. "Our oldest girls are in here. I can see them from my living room window."

She indicated two sanctuary goats among the others.

"Crabcakes was born with deformed front legs. He walks on his forearms. His first winter I was so worried he was going to tear himself up that I talked to my friends about getting him some chaps. But he wouldn't have any of it. And Frosty lost one of her back legs to frostbite."

EIGHTEEN YEARS AGO, Lambiase and Flanagan bought four Nigerian dwarf goats to produce tiny batches of cheese as an after-work hobby on their suburban plot in Oakland, California. Tired of their jobs at a law firm, they eventually left the West Coast in 2005.

"We wanted to do something creative and sustainable that involved animals, and we found this farm on the internet," said Lambiase.

"Had you ever been to the Adirondacks before?" I asked.

"No, and this was a real leap of faith. But something just clicked and we sold everything. Cashed in our retirement, loaded up two vehicles; Sheila had the four Nigerian dwarf goats in the back of an Element, I had the four dogs and two cats in another car, and across the country we went. Boy, we were the hit of the rest stops."

"So you didn't know about blackfly season or Adirondack winters?"

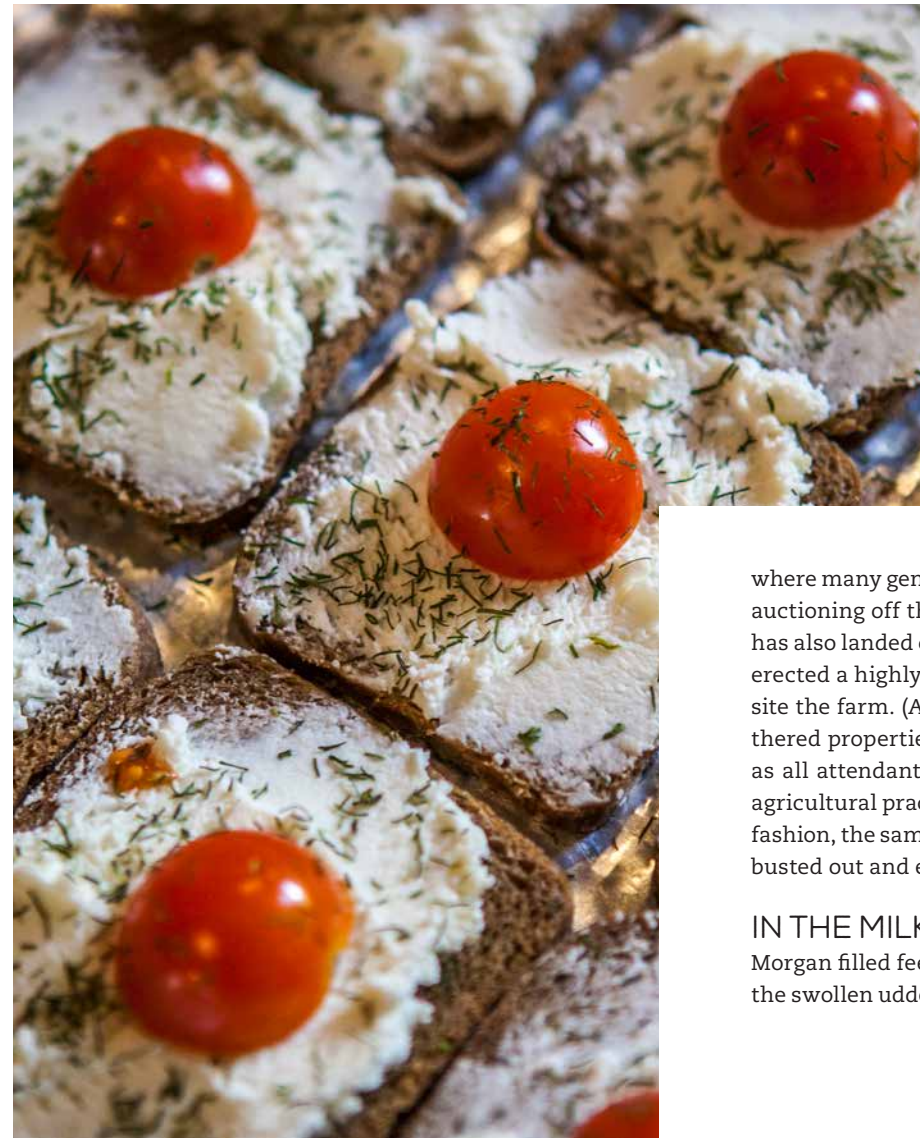
Lambiase grinned.

"The biggest mistake of our lives."

With 260 milking sheep and goats, Nettle Meadow is relatively small compared to the factory farms that have emerged in northern New York to supply the wholesale milk sector, but Lambiase and Flanagan also grapple with the issues that have put dairy in the recent news. The milk-price crisis can impact even independent creameries such as theirs: while Nettle Meadow produces all its own sheep and goat milk, the cow milk in some cheeses is sourced from Amish farms in the Mohawk Valley, south of the Blue Line,



Clockwise from above: Lorraine Lambiase with miniature donkey Arthur, one of the animals that live at the Kemp Sanctuary at Nettle Meadow farm. The farm's 260 milking goats and sheep help produce award-winning cheeses. Pages 40-41: The 1903 red barn that houses the sanctuary was renovated after it was damaged in Tropical Storm Irene.



where many generations-old operations are going bust and auctioning off their herds. And the "right-to-farm" debate has also landed on their doorstep, with a neighbor who has erected a highly visible protest sign on his property opposite the farm. (A state right-to-farm law protects grandfathered properties from encroaching development, as well as all attendant nuisance complaints regarding standard agricultural practices.) Of course, in typical North Country fashion, the same neighbor helped corral horses when they busted out and escaped the farm.

IN THE MILKING PARLOR, farm manager Desiree Morgan filled feeder bins with grain and hooked pumps to the swollen udders of goats waiting in the rapid-exit stalls.

The milk sucked with piston precision through pipes leading to a bulk tank, before being transferred to the pouring room in another converted barn. Morgan called each goat by name as it left the stalls, horns and hoofs clattering on the metal ramp and gates. Then others hurriedly took their places.

Flanagan, an apple-cheeked 51-year-old in a lab coat and hair net, greeted us outside the pouring room, where three more of her staff were scooping soft white curds from the hundred-gallon pasteurizing tank. (Nettle Meadow employs a total of 18 cheese-plant workers and farmhands.) She rises at 2:30 in the morning to process the chèvre resting overnight, and although she no longer works full-time as a toxic tort attorney, Flanagan also serves as



the Thurman town justice.

“To keep a part of my brain active that wouldn’t be otherwise,” she said, dumping sweet-smelling whey from a small tank of sheep milk. “I have the perfect schedule for it, I’m always working here, so if the sheriff calls me at one a.m. on a Saturday for an arraignment, he can probably catch me.”

The curds were scooped into molds to drain and set.

Nettle Meadow produces 35 farmstead cheeses, including a dozen semi-aged and seven washed-rind varieties—all poured, molded, covered in ash or salted by hand. Pasco’s Ration is named for the local lumberjack and outlaw Alvin “Sam” Pasco. Cheesemaker’s Folly is washed with Irish whiskey and stout. Briar Summit is an earthy blend of sheep, goat and cow milk infused with raspberry-leaf tea. Flanagan’s Kunik triple crème has won gold medals at the World Cheese Championship, blue ribbons at the New York State Fair and even a Good Food Award, one of the socially conscious food world’s toughest accolades to achieve.

“We tried to win that for 10 years,” said Flanagan. “They look at how healthy the cheese is, what ingredients go into it, what you feed and how you care for your animals, how you treat your employees. It’s a holistic award.”

We descended a steep flight of stairs with low overhead to the subterranean aging rooms in an 18th-century, stone-foundation butter cellar. Metal racks held hundreds of bloomy rind cheeses, some round, others shaped like miniature pyramids of Giza. Flanagan shuffled racks blocking access to her washed rind room, tucked behind a wall of plastic sheeting, her mad scientist laboratory with a pungent aroma produced by thistle rennet, citrus vodka, sea salt brine, locally brewed porter and hard cider. On one rack rested Flanagan’s experiment called “sheechego,” wheels gorgeously scored and browned like sections from a downed red cedar.

“It’s pretty but do I like the flavor?” she wondered aloud. “Because cheese is a living creature, it tastes so different on the first day when sellable as opposed to the last day, three months later, when it’s got multiple layers, which some people appreciate or others are disgusted by.”



## IF YOU GO:

**Find Nettle Meadow Farm and the Joseph F. Kemp Memorial Sanctuary at 484 South Johnsbury Road, Thurman. The cheese shop is open daily from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Learn more at (518) 623-3372, [www.nettlemeadow.com](http://www.nettlemeadow.com) or [www.kempsanctuaryatnettlemeadow.org](http://www.kempsanctuaryatnettlemeadow.org).**

Flanagan returned to pouring curds—she rarely leaves the farm, except to attend an occasional fancy food show or cheese competition. (When Eleven Madison asked Nettle Meadow to make a special-order cheese, Flanagan initially refused, because she’d never heard of the world-famous Manhattan restaurant.) Back outside, Lambiase checked on the hospital barn, where sick animals were quarantined. An elderly doe, frail and panting, rested in the hay. Despite her distaste for firearms, Lambiase admitted to taking matters into hand whenever the veterinarian couldn’t visit the farm.

“The biggest problem I had up here was I didn’t like guns. Nobody cared that I was gay, but they cared that I didn’t like guns, and now here I am, I own a gun, because I have to take care of my poor little animals,” she said, scratching the beard of a buck peering over the fence.

“Some limp, some look emaciated. But they’re not suffering and I’m not going to put an animal down because it’s difficult for a visitor to see. You know what I mean? Over the years I’ve learned when they look at you with a certain faraway look and a sunken eye, that’s when they’re ready. Those girls gave me all of their productive years, and these boys too, and I’m not going to get rid of them because I’m done using them. It’s a collaborative effort and they’re a major part of it. All I do is process the milk.”

At least twice a year, Nettle Meadow hosts charity Cheese Jam concerts to defray expenses for feeding its 120 sanctuary animals. The acoustics are spectacular in the horse barn’s converted hayloft. Indian Lake-based barn restorer Andy Leblanc and volunteer carpenters fortified the unusual roof, designed by turn-of-the-century architect Edmund Barber, after it sustained severe damage during Tropical Storm Irene in 2011. One by one, they repaired the gambrel roof’s intricate timber trusses and purlin beams, held together with wooden pins, as well as floors and windows. The concerts have been a big hit in the community. Other occasions for outreach include the annual Thurman Fall Farm Tour and tastings in the cheese shop during regular hours.

While Flanagan and Lambiase have themselves adapted to the Adirondacks, farming never gets easier in this harsh northern climate. Last winter, the mercury hovered at 30 below zero for a long stretch in early February, and they lost older livestock too weak to survive the bitter cold, including some of the goats that first traveled across the country with them. The freeze also wreaked havoc in the plant, wicking moisture out of aging cheeses. Ultimately, they threw out about \$20,000 worth.

“There’s only so much macaroni and cheese you can eat,” said Lambiase, shrugging. ▲

*Shane Mitchell is contributing editor at Saveur magazine. She is the author of Far Afield (2017, Random House) and recipient of the James Beard Foundation’s 2018 M. F. K. Fisher Distinguished Writing Award.*

Clockwise from top left: Summer “Cheese Jams” raise funds to care for the retired and abandoned animals that live here. The sanctuary is named for Lambiase’s late brother. Sheila Flanagan pours curds to make one of Nettle Meadow’s 35 farmstead cheeses.

