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

Brad Kessler

New York: Scribner, 2009

239 pp. \$24.00 (cloth)

Goat Song is an American pastoral. It opens with the author, novelist Brad Kessler, moving away from society (New York City) and toward nature (a seventy-five-acre Vermont farm) and chronicles an experiment in agrarian living. It is an engrossing memoir, revealing how animal husbandry tends to the herder's soul as well as to livestock. But Kessler does not proselytize. He grows to love living with goats, as he strives to make delicious cheeses. This seems to be a genuine revelation, reason alone to write a book.

Stunned by the complex yet delicate flavor of a fresh *chèvre* Kessler creates from some raw milk his wife brings home after goat-sitting for their new Vermont neighbors, the couple decide to acquire a few goats of their own. Kessler's book reveals the fullness of what goes into farmstead cheese: animal breeding and the selling of offspring (including males to meat markets); mandatory milkings; the sweaty, sticky collective labor of haying; the angst of birth and fear of goats' premature death; the trial and error of cheesemaking. There is nothing simple about it.

With spare and immediate prose Kessler is at his best describing the developing intimacy among him and his wife, their poodle Lola, and the goats. A sexually explicit chapter titled "Service" will allow no reader to forget that female ruminants do not lactate without first being impregnated. I grew frustrated on Kessler's behalf with the problem milker, Hannah, forever kicking over the milk pail or, worse, daintily dipping her soiled hoof into the milk. I rejoiced when Hannah's sister, Lizzie, is nursed back to health. And I laughed aloud when Kessler and his poodle mark their territory to deflect the threat of circling coyotes.

When we arrive at the chapters on cheesemaking, we are well prepared to follow Kessler into complex ecologies of livestock, microbes, and woodlands. Although I appreciate Kessler's modesty in giving credit for the astonishing flavor of his fresh *chèvre* to the fact of its fabrication "from clean raw milk," he may go too far in stating that "The simple truth is that you can't make a top-quality cheese from pasteurized milk" (p.165). The U.S. Food and Drug Administration requires raw-milk cheeses to be aged sixty days if they are to be sold; as a result, many artisan producers of *chèvre* and bloomy-rind cheeses have become adept at blending freeze-dried bacterial strains to re-enliven pasteurized milk. The regulatory reality that unpasteurized fresh

cheese is not commodifiable in this country is controversial; it also undoubtedly adds to the cheese's allure.

If Kessler risks romanticizing raw milk, he is more sanguine about goat husbandry, which he portrays as demanding, engrossing, often fun, but above all, *real*. Dairying, he writes, "is a kind of violence....We impregnate our does, steal their babies and sell them to strangers. However peaceful my morning milkings, there is coercion" (p.106). This inescapable tension between beneficence and coercion, between love and instrumentalism, may prompt Kessler's curious inquiry into herders throughout time and across cultures: how have *they* managed? By threading his memoir with stories about ancient Mesopotamians and colonial-era Sudanese, Basque peasants and Greek gods, Kessler suggests a kind of pastoral primitivism at the heart of human species-being. He delights in digging up pastoral roots for words and alphabetical letters (turn an A upside down and it resembles an ox, whence the Hebrew *aleph*), although other vocabulary is more recently available to him (words such as *terroir* and *artisanal*). Far from being a transhistorical tale, Kessler's story is very much of our cultural moment.

Kessler's American pastoralism is paradoxical in other ways, too. He offers an enviable glimpse of the pastoral good life, serving up a frothy contra-Starbucks coffee drink dubbed "capraccino." The drink begins with homemade *cajeta*, a Mexican goat-milk caramel, and ends with directions: "8. Sit in the shade with a view of the paddock. 9. Watch your goats head off to evening pasture. 10. Sip." (p.126). On the facing page, however, Kessler includes a stern reminder, "Wherever the notion of paradise exists, so does the idea that it was lost. Paradise is always in the past, an unachievable land, an unattainable state" (p.127).

Kessler notes that his book's title evokes the Greek origin of *tragedy*: from *tragoudhia*, meaning goat-song. Taking the author at his word and reading *Goat Song* as a tragedy, I drew a message similar to that of cultural historian Leo Marx in *The Machine in the Garden*, when he read Thoreau's *Walden*. Marx names Thoreau a "tragic," albeit complex, pastoralist. After "failing" to make an agrarian living raising beans for commercial trade (although his intent was more allegorical than pecuniary [from *pecus*, instructs Kessler, Latin for *cattle*]), Thoreau ends *Walden* by placing the pastoral ideal where it originated: in literature. Paradise, it turns out, is not to be found at Walden Pond; it is instead to be found in the pages of *Walden*.

The spiritual engagement Kessler finds in living with goats, culminating in the communion he takes of his cheese, seems similarly fleeting. The book's epilogue reports that Kessler and his wife, photographer Dona

McAdams, applied for a commercial license so that Kessler might sell his legally aged *tommes*. Kessler explains, “Trade curses everything it touches, wrote Thoreau, and I didn’t want trade in cheese to curse what I loved most” (p.238). Cheese for trade would mean milking more goats. “More goats would require a milking machine and a larger cheese vat, and there’d be more manure and more parasites and everyone would suffer—the animals and us” (p.238). The ultimate tragedy of Kessler’s romantic pastoralism is, perhaps, that he can’t see it scaling up to commercial viability without compromising what he loves: the meditative intimacy of hand-stripping milk from the teats of goats’ udders, developing cheese curd by feel (rather than pH meter) in a ten-gallon pot. His mode of living with goats is admittedly a luxury: the art of creating with goats’ milk is subsidized by the art of creating with word processor and laser printer. As with Thoreau, the pastoral idyll may survive longer in the art of Kessler’s profession than of his vocation. But for this, we readers are fortunate.

—Heather Paxson, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

The New Cultures of Food: Marketing Opportunities from Ethnic, Religious and Cultural Diversity

Edited by Adam Lindgreen and Martin K. Hingley

Farnham, Surrey, UK: Gower Publishing Limited, 2009

xxi + 319 pp. \$124.95 (cloth)

Nearly 10 percent of the United Kingdom’s 2007 population was born outside of the country.¹ While this statistic is one reflection of the UK’s diverse population, the full measure of any nation’s diversity includes the myriad communities that coalesce around shared ethnicity, religious practices, and expressions of culture, including food production, selection, and preparation.

The UK is the primary “host” country discussed in *The New Cultures of Food*. However, the seventeen chapters, each of which presents a complete study, cover a range of countries in three sections: The European Perspective, The Latin American Perspective, and The Near and Far East Asian Perspective. Organizing the articles by geography fits the bill for a discussion of marketing opportunities arising from international migration and diversity. However, there is also impressive breadth in the topics covered.

The editors, Adam Lindgreen and Martin Hingley, include a number of articles that clearly align with traditional market research. These studies highlight new, or newly studied, consumer groups in multicultural societies

and the factors that motivate their food-purchasing choices. Lorraine Brown identifies an opportunity for UK higher-education institutions to meet international students’ desire for fresh foods and to encourage sensitivity to their attempts to avoid “bland” (p.42) or “fatty” (p.43) English foods. Barcellos et al. compare emotions, attitudes, and concerns surrounding the purchase and consumption of beef in major beef-exporting countries—Brazil and Australia—and the efforts of a major European beef importer—the Netherlands—to improve beef marketing and sales. They find that Dutch consumers are highly concerned about the impact of beef production on the environment, while consumers in Australia and Porto Alegre, Brazil, are true “beef lovers” with strong associations between beef and their respective cultures (p.141). Hassan et al. study *halal* certification and signage in Malaysia and posit that businesses must identify and target their particular customer base, because *halal* certification sends a much stronger message to Muslims seeking certified foods than it does to non-Muslims, who may see certification solely as a mark of quality or as evidence that advertisers are not sensitive to their specific needs.

Interspersed among the studies examining motivation for food purchases are a number of articles that dive into broader discussions of the impacts of migration to show how health and nutrition, socioeconomic indicators, entrepreneurship, nostalgia, and technology all help to shape new market opportunities. Hillary Shaw explores dimensions of new migrants’ experiences in the UK—low wages, limited shopping choices for people who work long hours or far from home, and poor English-language skills—that may present obstacles to healthy food consumption. She posits that dietary challenges can improve with “increasing wealth, food knowledge, and access to culturally preferred foods” (p.32). Suresh H. Patel and Kuldip Gujral evaluate governmental initiatives to support independent Asian food markets in the West Midlands region and suggest national-level policy provisions to support independent retailers, based on proven instances of regeneration in distressed neighborhoods. Vanessa Fonseca identifies an intersection between international migration and technological innovation that creates new opportunities for online food businesses. Latin American food retailers with online Web sites cater to Latinos in the U.S. who, seeking to avoid high wire-transfer fees, use them to buy food for family members in their home countries. A second type of Web business, rooted in “nostalgic consumption,” provides direct online sales of Costa Rican products to Costa Ricans living abroad, as well as tourists “attempting to revive their food memories” (p.174).