

*Farmers of the Future*

# Couple Embraces Romance, Adventure In Cheesemaking

Painted Goat Farm Thrives After Ilyssa, Javier's Years Of Toil

By JIM KEVLIN

GARRATTSVILLE

**W**ho says the American Frontier is closed? In October 2006, Ilyssa Berg and Javier Flores, most recently of New York City, arrived "with a tent and a chainsaw" on 100 acres of untended hillside north of Garrattsville and began building their dream, a life of hard work and freedom



**Today, the Painted Goat flock includes 68 Alpines and Nubians, and two of the La Mancha breed.**

they believed the Painted Goat Farm could provide them.

They were soon joined by 26 pregnant goats.

"We kind of had blinkers on," Ilyssa reflected the other day as she showed a visitor around an operation that's become Otsego County's poster child for artisanal farm products, a niche many see as the future of local agriculture. "We look at pictures from that time. Wow! We were so happy and innocent."

First, the pioneers built a simple shed; when the snow fell, a small heater kept them warm. They – the two of them, fitting beams with handsaws – built what's now the "baby barn" that will be filled with 130 kids

*Please See GOATS, B3*



**A heat lamp in the "baby barn" casts a warm glow on Javier Flores and Ilyssa Berg, who pitched a tent on a Town of Burlington hillside seven years ago to begin building a 70-goat cheesemaking operation that today is the poster child of the growing value-added farm products industry in Otsego County.**

Jim Kevlin *All* OTSEGO.life

# Couple's Hard Work Built Thriving Painted Goat Farm

**GOATS/From B1**  
over the next few weeks — in the current 65 “moms” started giving birth on Valentine’s Day.

Next came the building that today is a combination milking parlor, processing plant, aging cave and home.

The detailed plans Javier had drawn over previous months included a cinder-block loop around the first

floor. It was then deep winter, and he had to build a bonfire in the middle so it would be warm enough for the cement to set.

By January, though, that main building was far along along from the electrical hookup — so, the whir of an electrical saw replaced the rhythm of the chainsaw and the growl of hand tools.

“We thought we would be

done by March — six months, we would be done,” said Ilyssa, but it wasn’t so, and those 26 baby goats started giving birth. In addition to the ongoing construction, “we had to start milking them.” In August 2007, the couple had their first cheese, a feta. Soon, “we had enough to get a call in September from the Cooperstown Farmers’ Market.” A vendor booth had opened up. Ilyssa returned from that first Saturday with \$200 in her pocket. Success!

Ellen Pope, the Otsego 2000 executive director, sees what Berg and Flores are doing as “tremendous for the county. They go to farmers’ markets, they have customers in New York City, they ship their cheese.” The land they have is not ideal for cropland, but it’s ideal for goats.

She mentioned Chuck Williamson, who has started growing hops at his Butter-nuts Beer property, and Ed Lentz Jr., son of the county rep, who has been growing wheat and flour, and experimenting with raising beef, at

Fox Falls Farm, as examples of similar ferment in the Gar-ratsville area.

“What they have in common is they’re all young,” said Pope. “They defy the assumption that farmers are aging out.”

CADE Executive Director Rebecca Morgan, who is tasked with developing a food hub to ship local value-added farm products in New York City, often repeats how there is \$1 billion in unmet need in Gotham. Pope said, a promising number for Ilyssa and Javier.

To hear them tell the story, their arrival on the Gar-ratsville hilltop was serendipitous. Ilyssa, from Nanuet, Rockland County, was doing research in Ecuador for a Cornell master’s in botany when she met Javier, who was toiling — and loving it — with five brothers on his family’s farm in Otavalo, an Andean town surrounded by three volcanoes.

Three years later, Javier followed her to New York. While she continued her post-grad studies, he began work in a cabinet factory. He felt cramped by the routine after “a full life” on the family farm. He remembers his boyhood: “I was working hard, but I was free.”

By December 2004, “we were looking for something to do with our lives,” Ilyssa said, “after getting married and trying to meld our lives together in a way that would make both of us happy and lead us both on a path, a similar path.”

They were considering Ecuador when they turned to ubiquitous Google. “Up popped: ‘Goat cheese



Jim KeVlin/ALLOTSEGO live  
**The small shed in the back is where Ilyssa and Javier lived during their first winter on Painted Goat Farm. The cheese-plant/home is at left.**



**In one of the aging caves, Javier points out how the air that comes in through the vent behind him exits through the ceiling, aiding the cheeses’ development.**

barn, the fourth building in the green-painted complex you can see from County Route 17. The animals are rotated through 35 acres of pasture. Since the couple bought a tractor last year, two of the pastures have been tilled and reseeded, with more to follow.

Efficiency reigns in the gleaming processing plant. The eight-goat milking stand is about to be expanded to 24. “It will save at least one hour every day for me,” said Javier. “I can spend the time in the cheese room.” The other day, the two aging caves — barricaded by two heavy wooden doors — commissioned a Medieval monastery — in the basement were empty and pristine, waiting for the season’s cheese that will arrive shortly.

From feta, the farm expanded to chevre, the traditional French goat cheese, then a brie variation, a harder gouda-like product and ricotta. The latest product is a combination of milk and caramel, similar to Dulce de Leche, originally a Portuguese treat.

From humble beginnings that Saturday at the Cooperstown Farmers’ Market, the farm is producing 10,000 pounds of cheese a year. Since year three, the operation’s been profitable, Ilyssa said. Whenever the aging caves start to fill up and she starts to worry, someone calls to reorder or a new customer turns up. The farm sells all it can produce, across New York State and in the city. (Last year, it was served at the U.S. Open.)

Locally, Painted Goat cheeses can be found at The Otsego, the Rose & Kettle in Cherry Valley and Brewery Omnegang’s cafe. The Leonard sisters will serve it again when they reopen Origins Cafe on Beaver Meadow Road this summer. The Green Earth in Oneonta and Cooperstown Natural Foods also carry it.

“Each year, we do realize, “yes, it’s getting easier,” said Ilyssa.

Incidentally, the “painted goats” is a “pintone,” a variegated animal with a white band across its middle, a member of the first herd.

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