

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:00:09](#)):

So, I'm George Van Vlaanderen. I'm co-owner and operator with my wife Kristin Doolan of Doe's Leap Farm. We milk 42 alpine goats and produce all of that milk into Vermont's only, I believe, Vermont's only certified organic goat cheese and kefir. We also do some sausages and have a way-fed pork operation along with a self-serve farm store.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:00:50](#)):

I'm your host, Andy Chamberlin, and I take you behind the scenes to learn how farmers are building their business in sustainable agriculture. These farmer-to-farmer interviews cover a wide range of topics, from cropping systems, marketing channels, lifestyle decisions, and lessons learned along the way.

([00:01:06](#)):

One ask I have for you is if you can leave a comment or write a review, there's a feature enabled right now called fan mail, so you can send a message via text to the podcast right from the link in the description. These come through as anonymous, so if you want to be known or would like me to reply, let me know who you are in the message. Give it a whirl. It's quick, easy, and free, and I'd love to hear from you.

([00:01:29](#)):

Today's episode comes to you from Bakersfield, Vermont, where we visit with George Van Vlaanderen of Doe's Leap Farm. He shares how they developed the farm from raw wooded land, while raising children, goats, and living in a yurt, all at the same time over 20 years ago. He shares now how their grazing systems has evolved using ElectroNet fences, to wireless collars and how he's improving biodiversity of his pastures using the Vermont Rip Sower. Thanks for listening. I hope you enjoy this episode.

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:02:05](#)):

Yeah. I'm George Van Vlaanderen, I am co-owner of Doe's Leap Farm, and we are in Bakersfield, Vermont. And we milk 42 goats and process all of that milk into cheese and kefir. And we also have a side business of raising pastured pigs and making sausage.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:02:29](#)):

I didn't know you did pigs too.

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:02:30](#)):

Yeah. Small scale.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:02:32](#)):

Yep. That's good. How did you get started farming?

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:02:38](#)):

I studied agricultural economics at UVM. And I had planned to do the Peace Corps after graduating, and I met my wife Kristen, who is now my farming partner as well. And I couldn't do Peace Corps with her, we weren't married, so we ended up moving to Ecuador with no real plan other than we wanted to work in farming. And we ended up working for the Austrian equivalent of USAID. So, we were living with a couple from Uruguay, and we were working with these Colombian folks. And our job was to help

farmers in the Andes diversify into market vegetables. So, they had a good cattle operation, and so we were helping them kind of start and maintain market gardens for income diversification.

(00:03:46):

So anyway, we did that for about a year. And then we came back to the States and we both started at the University of Maine, the Sustainable Ag Program. So the vision was to get our masters, and at least my vision was to end up going to get my PhD and do ag research and teach. But about a year into the program, I realized that I'd rather do agriculture rather than study it. I was doing some work on dairy farms.

(00:04:24):

And anyway, I said to my wife, "Kristen, how about we start a dairy farm?" And she said, "Well, I had a goat as a kid. How about goats instead?" And so I'm like, "Okay, that sounds good." We had no idea what we were doing. So we ended up finishing our masters. And right before we defended our theses, we ended up purchasing this piece of land here in Bakersfield. So it was 130 acres. There's nothing on here, no infrastructure at all. We were living in a yurt for two years at the University of Maine, well, outside of Orono. So we picked up our yurt and moved it onto this property. Kristen's uncle rented a bulldozer and roughed in our driveway, and we got electric up here, and we lived in our yurt, and we started building our farm with no clue as to what we were doing in every aspect, building, goat rearing. And we just kind of forged ahead from there.

Andy Chamberlin (00:05:27):

Learning as you went.

George Van Vlaanderen (00:05:29):

Yeah. Yeah.

Andy Chamberlin (00:05:31):

So, how long have you been raising goats here on this property?

George Van Vlaanderen (00:05:36):

So we bought the farm this piece of land in '97. So we started building, we had goats, we had four goats right off the bat, which was not a good move. The thought was we were going to practice, making cheese, while we were building our facility. And it was ultimately a distraction and just something we probably should not have done. But anyway, we got our goats in '97. We built our facility. We ended up moving out of the yurt. Our daughter was born in '99. We moved into an apartment above our cheese facility and got licensed that same year, so '99. So we're 26 years in as a licensed facility. 26 plus.

Andy Chamberlin (00:06:28):

Busy startup.

George Van Vlaanderen (00:06:31):

Yeah, it was crazy. It was crazy.

Andy Chamberlin (00:06:37):

Not uncommon.

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:06:38](#)):

Yeah.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:06:38](#)):

That's for sure. So, what are your primary markets for your products?

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:06:45](#)):

So, Burlington is a big market for us. And when we were looking for land, we set a one-hour drive radius around Burlington, which was probably the smartest thing we did, is we identified that as our primary market. So, we deliver to Burlington once a week to both healthy living stores, city market. We sell cheese through the farmhouse group, and there are various restaurants. We also have a local distributor, Pumpkin Village Foods, that goes to the outlying areas, Middlebury, and Hunger Mountain. And so they come here once a week. We also have a distributor who specializes in organic cheeses. He sends the truck up from New Jersey, probably once every three weeks, and that gets, I don't know where that cheese goes. It goes all over the country. I don't know.

([00:07:48](#)):

And then lastly, we sell some cheese through Farmers To You, which is a organization that takes Vermont products, brings them down to the Boston area, and sells products down there through an online system. People can pre-order and pick up their goods.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:08:08](#)):

Nice. That's a pretty far reach.

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:08:11](#)):

Yeah. No, that's worked out well.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:08:14](#)):

That's good. And is some retail sales here in your farm store?

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:08:18](#)):

Yeah. So we attended the Burlington Farmer's Market for probably I think 24 years, 23 years. And a big part of our business at that market was selling sausages. So I mentioned that we have a sideline business. So, probably 15 years ago or so I decided I wanted to do sausage and I started experimenting with recipes. And part of the impetus was we have these retired milkers that we didn't have a good market for. And so the idea was to make sausage, make goat sausage, and sell it at the farmer's market.

([00:09:03](#)):

And I figured that I probably should sample it because people weren't going to be too into goat sausage, so I ended up getting a small grill, and I thought, "Oh, well, if I have a grill, I might as well sell some sausage sandwiches." And I ended up not having to sample at all. It just kind of people smelled the sausage grilling and it took off and we diversified into, we got up to six different varieties of pork sausage in addition to this goat sausage. And so that was a thriving part of our business for about eight to 10 years at the farmer's market. So we sold our cheese, we sold pork cuts, we sold frozen sausages, and we sold these sandwiches. Well, during Covid that all dried up. We couldn't sell prepared foods

there. And we had about \$50,000 of pork inventory in our freezers. So, that was part of the impetus to start a self-serve farm store.

(00:10:08):

And so that has remained. And we ended up just not going back to the farmer's market. It was just such a quality of life change that I never would have envisioned. It was the most profitable part of our farm. And we still opted not to go back. We took a one-year sabbatical, so we paid our fees and thought, "Let's just give it one more year," because it's all based on-

Andy Chamberlin (00:10:39):

Hold your spot.

George Van Vlaanderen (00:10:39):

Yeah, we hold our spot, and we were one of the senior members, so we had a really good spot. And yeah, we just made the decision not to go back. And so we have this little farm store. It's a fraction of the income, and even a smaller fraction of the work. So, we no longer do grilled sausages, but we sell cheese and frozen pork, and sausages in the farm store.

Andy Chamberlin (00:11:06):

Nice.

George Van Vlaanderen (00:11:06):

Yeah.

Andy Chamberlin (00:11:07):

How many pigs do you raise?

George Van Vlaanderen (00:11:09):

So, during the height of the farmer's market, we were doing up to 30 pigs a year. We probably do six to 10 maybe at the most, that we move through the store.

Andy Chamberlin (00:11:23):

So that seems like a few pigs goes a long ways.

George Van Vlaanderen (00:11:27):

Yeah. I mean, yes, we grow them out to pretty heavy hanging weights, so they hang 200 plus 220, 230, so we're getting a lot of meat per pig. And we can use a lot of that fat in our sausages too. So yeah, it's a good system. And also, the pigs play an important role in terms of our overall farm management. So we actually pump all of the whey from our cheese operation out to the pigs on pasture. So they're using this what would be a waste product for most cheese operations, and it's a great source of pig nutrition. It's high in protein. And so that's an important piece.

(00:12:20):

And then we are also using the pigs to renovate pasture land. So, we will move them probably once a week, and then we will go over that area where they've been with some minimal, very basic tillage with

the tractor, and then we broadcast seed more desirable species that will grow up and provide better pasture for our goats, and you have the fertility from the pigs. So it's a really good system, and it fits well into our overall farming system.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:13:00](#)):

Are you raising those pigs, or are you bringing in young...

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:13:03](#)):

All piglets, yeah. Even when we are doing a lot of piglets, or a lot of pigs, we decided never to have sows on the property. I think unless you're at scale, that's a way to really lose some money.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:13:19](#)):

Simplifies that process.

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:13:21](#)):

Yeah, absolutely.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:13:23](#)):

Do you have a particular breed of pig that you like?

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:13:27](#)):

No. I mean, no. I kind of try to find pigs that are available. We get a lot of pigs from, our butcher Tony Bro's market up in North Troy. So yeah, we're not too picky.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:13:43](#)):

Yeah. Goats on the other hand?

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:13:46](#)):

Goats we're picky with, yeah. I mean, we have a closed herd. We have alpine goats. And yes, we are constantly selecting animals that do well in our pasture-based system. And that's something we've focused on since the beginning. So, most goat dairies are either fully confinement, meaning they're in the barn 24/7, or if not, they often have kind of a loafing pasture, or a couple of different pastures. So the goats are turned out, and they're kind of on this same piece of land for often weeks at a time. And so part of my focus in grad school was cow grazing management. And so right off the bat, we decided that we wanted to have our goats out on pasture and provide a fresh paddock of grass for them every 12 hours. So after every milking, they get a fresh piece of grass, or we've moved increasingly towards browse, which is more broadleaf species. And that's really been a big focus of our operation from the beginning. And there's been a lot of learning on that front.

([00:15:15](#)):

But in the last year, we got a grant from DBIC to purchase a virtual fencing system for our animals. So, starting in July of 2024, we got these collars for the goats, and I think we're the second goat dairy in the US that has pioneered this technology. And that's been a complete game changer for us.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:15:46](#)):

So it's found a home here.

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:15:48](#)):

Yeah, yeah. It's incredible technology. It has saved us a ton of labor. So we were moving electric net fencing, as I said, twice a day.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:16:03](#)):

How many feet of that?

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:16:05](#)):

So we have high tensile fencing, all six strand high tensile fencing all around our farm. So we utilize that as well. We tie into that. So, we are moving a minimum of two, three nets, 165 feet long, twice daily, and moving the water as well. And then, as I mentioned, we started off on grazing goats on pasture. And they're really much more suited to grazing or browsing, which is, they prefer broadleaf species, stump sprouts, forbs, broadleaf plants. But it's very difficult to drag fence through that terrain, which we did to an extent. But the virtual fencing, we simply open up an app on our phone and draw a paddock or a fence, a virtual fence around any area on our farm. And we utilize our two border colleagues to drive the goats out to that virtual pasture, and we provide water out there.

([00:17:25](#)):

And yeah, it's been amazing. And it's also, we found an unexpected result, is we are getting anywhere from about a 10 to 15% boost in milk production as a result of using this technology.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:17:41](#)):

Interesting.

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:17:45](#)):

So generally, when you're moving animals around a farm, you have all of your infrastructure, net fence and watering systems in one area of your farm, and you tend to move sequentially through the farm, so to speak. And with the virtual fencing, we kind of divorced ourselves from that, and we can look at areas that we think are going to provide the best feed for our animals. And so we can simply move them on a dime. So we set up a new paddock anywhere we want, and then the border collies are these guided missiles that we can just direct the goats wherever we want, whenever we want, and we put them in those areas. And part of that is, during the summer, shade is a big part of keeping animals comfortable and productive. So, we really kind of dial in goat comfort and feed value with this technology.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:18:50](#)):

So it's like this morning's a little cooler, a little cloudier, so you can put them in that open area where there might be a little less shade.

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:18:56](#)):

Yeah. So this time of year, it's interesting, we still utilize pasture, especially early and late season for our goats, so traditional grass pasture. But as we move into September, the browse quality starts to decline. So right now just the goats are a hundred percent on browse, and have been pretty much all of August and July. And during that time, our pastures, especially now, because with this drought our pastures are

growing slowly, and we're kind of saving that pasture land for September and October, late September and October grazing. So we're kind of building up this resource and utilizing this other declining resource to the ultimate benefit of the animals and our profitability.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:19:50](#)):

Do the goats have to get used to or taper into going from browse to pasture? Or is that green enough material? It's not like hay to green pasture, right?

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:19:59](#)):

Correct. Yep. No, it's a seamless, there's no real transition, so to speak. So they're eating...

Andy Chamberlin ([00:20:07](#)):

Because they're different, but... Yeah.

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:20:08](#)):

Yeah, that's ...

Andy Chamberlin ([00:20:09](#)):

Close enough.

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:20:10](#)):

Correct.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:20:11](#)):

Okay. I'm familiar with the virtual fencing because I've seen it talked about and whatnot. But for those that don't know, does every goat have a call? Or how do they know where the boundary is?

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:20:25](#)):

Yeah.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:20:26](#)):

Do they get shocked?

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:20:28](#)):

Yep. Yeah. Yeah. So, as part of this grant, we produce a series of videos on the training process and how we utilize the technology. So, if you want real specifics, you can get on our Instagram or YouTube, and check out some of those videos. But basically, every goat has a collar. It has a solar panel on the collar that charges the battery. And basically, we set the perimeter up on our phone. And as the goats approach that perimeter of the fence, they get the sound, an increasing volume and frequency of sound. So it's beep, beep, beep, beep, beep, beep, beep, beep, beep, beep, beep.

([00:21:18](#)):

So, as soon as they start to hear that, they know, and they just simply know to turn around. So, it took us a surprisingly short amount of time to train the goats. It took us about, I want to say three days to

have the herd fully trained to this virtual fencing system. And the company recommends a system by which you train them, which includes having physical fence on three sides, and just one virtual boundary. So they kind of are just interacting with one boundary.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:21:53](#)):

That makes sense.

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:21:53](#)):

And also, the virtual fence is around the physical boundary as well. So they're getting that feedback as well. But they can't, obviously, since it's electrified, the fence is electrified.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:22:07](#)):

They're trained to that one already.

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:22:07](#)):

Yeah. So they're kind of getting this feedback, and they pick it up very quickly. And then also, we also have to charge the collars on occasion. So, every goat really doesn't need to have a collar because they're responding to the herds signals. So, they hear that signal from another collar, and they're just conditioned to turn around. We would never have invested in this technology simply because we have tens of thousands of dollars in fencing investment already. And it's not cheap. There are about 200 plus dollars a collar, maybe up to 250. Plus you pay, I think it's around a thousand bucks a month... Sorry, a thousand bucks, maybe a thousand to \$1,200 a year for our 42 goat milking herd. So, it's fairly substantial investment. But having utilized the technology and realized how powerful and profitable it is for us, both in terms of labor and milk production, in retrospect, if we had to pay for it from the beginning, it would be a worthwhile investment for us.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:23:23](#)):

That's good feedback.

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:23:24](#)):

Yeah, yeah. And as I said, part of the grant processes that I kind of videos, I just make some videos on my phone and mainly post them on Instagram and Facebook, but we've gotten almost a quarter million views on this, just the fencing videos alone, the virtual fencing. And so people are kind of hungry for this information and technology.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:23:55](#)):

Like you said, you weren't even really expecting the yield boost either.

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:23:58](#)):

Yeah, absolutely. And that's part of the...

PART 1 OF 4 ENDS [00:24:04]

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:24:02](#)):

Yeah, that's part of the message too, at least for our ... In our situation too, our milk is ... We have pretty high value milk. I mean, we're not selling fluid milk. We're processing it all into cheese. So even small boosts in production can make a big difference and-

Andy Chamberlin ([00:24:20](#)):

It's a multiplier, yeah.

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:24:21](#)):

Yeah. In terms of profitability.

([00:24:25](#)):

But I'll just mention that a big piece for me, one of the things I'm passionate about and what is key both to our grazing system prior to the collars and also with the collars, is the use of border collies to move goats efficiently to and from pasture. That's a particular interest of mine and something that I feel is just a major efficiency boost that's almost incalculable, that I feel like is left on the table for a lot of farms. I think people look at these dogs moving goats seamlessly and they think that's like magic and that could never happen. But the fact of the matter is rather, these dogs are just bred over millennia to kind of do this job.

([00:25:24](#)):

And you know, I've trained all of the dogs on our farm with no prior experience; made tons of mistakes, but it's possible for anyone to get a dog and train it up and move cows, sheep, goats, etc, around and really save some time and effort.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:25:49](#)):

I know dog breeds are very ... Some are more trained or inclined to a certain behavior from the beginning. So I know Border Collies are known for herding dogs, so do they have a good instinct of doing that? Like do they pick up things quickly?

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:26:08](#)):

Yeah. Oh, absolutely. I mean-

Andy Chamberlin ([00:26:10](#)):

You know, I have a hound dog.

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:26:11](#)):

Yeah, yeah.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:26:12](#)):

He's really hard to train.

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:26:13](#)):

Yeah, I mean, border collies are very ... They're obviously very intelligent animals, they're very biddable, but they're very ... You know, depending on the dog, they're also just very driven. So it can be a challenge to kind of temper their drive and to get them to tune into the handler, and also not kind of

tamp down that instinct. You want to encourage that instinct. But I would argue that if your interest is moving animals, moving livestock, border collies are the breed to have.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:26:55](#)):

Did you find a specific breeder or did you just find a Border Collie and know you could work with it?

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:27:02](#)):

Yeah, actually we fortunately adopted a dog early, early on in our farming career, and he had been trained somewhat on sheep, so had some foundation. And we had to kind of do some additional training with goats. They're pretty different. Sheep are much more flighty and goats tend to be much stronger in resisting the dog. But to answer your question, it's mainly been ... You know, we try to have two dogs at all times. We don't necessarily need two dogs to move our animals, but we absolutely need one dog. So if we get a dog that's injured, we always have another dog ready to do the job. And so we tend to ... When a dog passes away, the younger dog is probably around six or so, so we usually get a puppy at that stage.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:28:05](#)):

Right.

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:28:05](#)):

So there's no pressure to get that puppy up and working since we have a good dog.

([00:28:11](#)):

So to answer your question, we kind of just try to find well-bred dogs.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:28:16](#)):

Mm-hmm.

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:28:17](#)):

So there's the New England Border Collie Association. We've gotten several dogs from David Kennard in New Hampshire, who's a great breeder. The last two dogs we've purchased are what are called trial dogs. So there's a vibrant trialing program all over the Northeast. They have these sheep trials where people compete, they bring their dogs and they go through these trialing competitions.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:28:48](#)):

Yeah.

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:28:48](#)):

So we've found several dogs just from trialers.

([00:28:54](#)):

Yeah. So we find them where we can and we want to make sure they have really good working background. That's the main thing.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:29:02](#)):

Thinking about back to the fence, if you were just getting into goat dairy production, do you think it would be quite easy to start out with a virtual fencing system?

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:29:19](#)):

I do. Absolutely.

([00:29:22](#)):

And I think one of the real benefits of this technology is ag land in Vermont is so expensive right now, and the interesting part of this technology with goats in particular is you could buy forest land, you could just simply buy 30 acres of forest land, and hire a mechanical harvester to come in and log a good portion of that.

([00:29:57](#)):

So this is what I would do. If I was starting off-

Andy Chamberlin ([00:30:00](#)):

Yeah, if you were starting now.

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:30:01](#)):

... and I wanted to get into dairying goats, I would buy an undeveloped piece of forest land, I would hire a logger to come in, and I would mark trees that I want to keep. We're really into silvopasture, and the idea is to kind of keep these climax vegetation species like hard maple and red oak, beech; you know, select various trees and basically cut down everything else.

([00:30:32](#)):

And then you're going to get a whole lot of stump sprouts and forbs and really good feed over the next several years coming up in that land.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:30:40](#)):

Right.

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:30:41](#)):

And the trick then is how do you fence it? Well, that's where the virtual fencing comes in. So with essentially no infrastructure other than this technology, you could be up and running.

([00:30:54](#)):

And the other piece, and especially relevant now, is we are in a serious drought. I mean, we haven't had significant rainfall for over a month. We had got some last night, but pastures are declining in value, if available at all. NOFA is now kind of giving waivers to organic farms to say, "Okay, the pasture is declining-"

Andy Chamberlin ([00:31:20](#)):

[inaudible 00:31:21].

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:31:20](#)):

... So you get a waiver to pasture your animals this time of year.

(00:31:25):

At any rate, drought is ... That's just not ... You know, all of those stump sprouts and all of those forbs just perform so much better in a drought.

Andy Chamberlin (00:31:36):

Mm-hmm.

George Van Vlaanderen (00:31:36):

In addition to that, what we started doing when we're clearing land for our goats is we simply fell trees. So we would down trees, the goats would just defoliate all of those trees, and we would cut up the rest for firewood. And we heat our home and we also heat our pasteurizer and all of our hot water from wood that we've harvested from the land, which more often than not has been defoliated by our goats, which then a year or two later, you're getting these stump sprouts. So it's this very kind of synergistic, efficient system.

(00:32:15):

But anyway, the point being that this technology, I would argue could really lower the entrance into ag, especially goat dairying, by ostensibly lowering the cost of land. So instead of buying a developed piece of land with existing pasture, you have this opportunity to kind of come in at a much lower per acre rate and make a go of it.

Andy Chamberlin (00:32:48):

Right.

(00:32:48):

What do you think of the current market right now? Do you think there's a lot of open space available for new goat farms in the Northeast, or ...

George Van Vlaanderen (00:32:59):

You're talking about the market for cheese itself?

Andy Chamberlin (00:33:03):

Yeah, just like the industry.

George Van Vlaanderen (00:33:05):

Yeah, you know, that's hard to say. We've been at it for so long that I don't ... You know, we have these existing accounts. I'm not out there peddling cheese.

Andy Chamberlin (00:33:14):

Yeah.

George Van Vlaanderen (00:33:16):

I will say that since we were one of the first kind of small dairies to start cheese making in the state ... There were certainly a handful of farms existing that were around, but since then, the cheese industry has really blossomed. So I think the competition is heavier since we started.

(00:33:45):

And when we started, our cheese was pretty good at best. You know, we were kind of figuring it out, and it was kind of like this novel thing. And people were like, "Oh, sure." You know, restaurants, and they were all kind of open to it and it was-

Andy Chamberlin (00:33:59):

Unique and new. Yeah.

George Van Vlaanderen (00:34:00):

It was good enough. And thankfully we upped our game as we're learning everything, obviously. But I think that's changed now because there's a lot of really high quality, good cheese on the market.

(00:34:13):

So I think it's tighter, the competition is tighter, but I get a sense that there is market available depending on the strategy and ... Yeah.

Andy Chamberlin (00:34:26):

Yeah, I see it as a great use of Vermont's landscape; rocky, rugged, wooded terrain.

George Van Vlaanderen (00:34:33):

Yeah.

Andy Chamberlin (00:34:34):

That seems like a good way to make some use of the woods.

George Van Vlaanderen (00:34:38):

Absolutely. Yeah.

Andy Chamberlin (00:34:39):

Even if the trees are tapped, I would think that that could also work well together.

George Van Vlaanderen (00:34:45):

Yeah, well, I think there's some ... Maybe there's some research out of Cornell. It's been a few years, but they had been using goats to kind of help clear some of the understory and competition for sugar maple. But yeah, I totally agree.

Andy Chamberlin (00:35:01):

What did you envision your farm would look like when you started?

George Van Vlaanderen (00:35:11):

Oh man. No vision. We were just fighting. Just fighting to stay alive. I mean ... You know. We just-

Andy Chamberlin (00:35:18):

You just knew it involved goats.

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:35:21](#)):

Yeah. I mean, well, yeah, we had that vision. We knew that we wanted to milk goats and make cheese. And beyond that, it was a day-to-day struggle. We had two young kids. I started off working off farm. I was a teacher for 10 years.

([00:35:42](#)):

So yeah, I mean, I was working full time, at least during the school year, and my wife was on the farm trying to figure stuff out. We had interns right from the very beginning. We built a cabin. So that was helpful. And yeah, it was just a day-to-day thing that eventually we kind of matured and progressed out of that triage stage and ...

([00:36:13](#)):

Yeah. So other than the goats and the cheese, I couldn't have envisioned what life would be like 20 years in the future-

Andy Chamberlin ([00:36:22](#)):

Right. Yeah.

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:36:22](#)):

... Where we were going to get out of this 80 hour a week schedule.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:36:29](#)):

Yeah.

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:36:30](#)):

And thankfully we have, which is good.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:36:34](#)):

Yep.

([00:36:35](#)):

Do you have employees now, or interns?

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:36:37](#)):

Yeah. So our original piece of property, we bought 130 acres. And then 15 years ago, the adjacent farm came on the market, and that has a house, a few barns and 25 acres. So we ended our intern program in favor of a part-time employee who lives in that house, and it's part of their compensation. And they are milking five mornings a week, and then they do the majority of the cheese and sausage processing.

([00:37:15](#)):

And that was a positive development for us. You know, interns were great. They obviously weren't very costly. We're basically feeding them and providing them an education. But it was a lot of labor to keep an intern busy. We tried to do a really good job in exposing them to every part of the farm and make it really worth their while. So now we have an employee who simply, they know their job, they go in and do it. There's very little management. And it frees up our time to kind of dial in management in other areas of the farm.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:37:51](#)):

Yeah.

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:37:51](#)):

So yeah, we have a part-time employee who lives on the farm in their own house, and then we have another part-time employee who milks five to seven shifts a week. So that's been a super positive quality of life change for us, simply not milking as much as we used to. Milking is about an hour and 20 to 30 minutes, hour and 30 minutes twice a day.

([00:38:24](#)):

So it's my wife and me; we're now full-time. I quit my job in 2008; and then two part-time employees.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:38:36](#)):

Well, that's, yeah, a significant number of hours of the day if you were doing it all yourselves.

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:38:43](#)):

Yeah.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:38:43](#)):

It's three hours just milking.

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:38:44](#)):

Yep. And what would happen is we start milking at 6:30 in the morning and then we milk at 5:0 at night, and of course, we're just working throughout the day.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:38:56](#)):

Yeah, right, doing other things.

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:38:57](#)):

So you're looking at a 14- hour day just right off the bat right there.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:39:03](#)):

Every day. Yeah.

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:39:05](#)):

So yeah, it really frees up some time; not just for work, but just for pleasure and relaxation, you know?

Andy Chamberlin ([00:39:16](#)):

Anything other than moving and milking.

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:39:20](#)):

Yeah. Absolutely.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:39:22](#)):

That seems pretty quick, an hour and a half for 40 some odd goats.

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:39:26](#)):

Yeah. And it gets even faster because goats, like humans and cows, have a lactation curve, so they kind of peak at about eight weeks after they have their babies and then the milk production declines.

([00:39:48](#)):

And then another thing is we do what's called extended lactations with our goats. Traditionally, goats are very ... They have very seasonal estrous cycles. So unlike cows, they come into heat mainly from October through November. And so all of the goats are bred in that window, and they all have their babies in March. So back in the day, we were milking over 50 goats, and they were bred all at the same time, and we would have a hundred plus babies in a three-week period. And it was brutal.

([00:40:32](#)):

So we had come across some research, I think it's from Langston University, and I think it's in Oklahoma, maybe almost 17 years ago, which looked at what are called extended lactations, which is instead of breeding a goat ... The gestation of a goat is five months. So we generally would breed them in October, milk them through December, give them two months rest, and then they would have their babies. So instead of breeding those goats, you simply continue to milk them.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:41:07](#)):

Mm-hmm.

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:41:08](#)):

So you're milking them for essentially two years.

([00:41:11](#)):

So we decided to take half of our herd on that cycle, and the other half would be bred. So instead of breeding 50 goats, we are breeding 25, 25 would be on this extended lactation, and then they would flip flop.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:41:28](#)):

Yeah, that makes sense.

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:41:29](#)):

So at the end of the extended lactation, they would get bred, have their babies.

([00:41:36](#)):

And that, I would argue is one of the real game changers for us in terms of profitability and efficiency for a number of reasons. One is ... I mentioned the babies. You know, goat kids are a real liability. I mean, you're having these animals, there's just not a great market for them. You're feeding them costly milk. It's a huge amount of labor. So instead of trying to move a hundred goats, you are moving half that.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:42:08](#)):

Yep.

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:42:09](#)):

So that's number one. The second thing is we have cash flow year round, which is good. So our products are on the shelf.

(00:42:16):

And then thirdly, in terms of these extended lactations, the goats who have gone through this extended lactation are using a lot less energy to produce that milk compared to an average of 2.2 goat kids.

(00:42:35):

So they have more than twins on average, and it takes a lot of energy to produce that amount of baby in five months. So what happens is at the end of that extended lactation, the goats come into their ... They give birth and they generally have much better body condition, which means they are milking better and they're more productive and healthier. So it's this multiple win-

Andy Chamberlin (00:43:03):

And you have continuous milk.

George Van Vlaanderen (00:43:04):

And we have continuous milk.

(00:43:05):

So there's the less babies, constant cash flow, our products aren't leaving the shelves for a series of months where someone could say, "Oh, let's try this kefir instead." And then finally, goat health and productivity has been a big bonus.

Andy Chamberlin (00:43:22):

Makes sense. Kind of gives them a chance to re-strengthen and relax a little longer, because even though they're still getting milked, they're not going through the birthing process.

George Van Vlaanderen (00:43:32):

Yeah, they're just using a lot less energy to produce that milk.

(00:43:35):

And they are producing a lot ... And that research, what it showed was that they produce a lot less fluid ... Well, certainly significantly less fluid milk, but the solids, the fat and the protein, pounds of fat and protein over that extended lactation was not statistically different from two standard lactations. So they're producing the same fat and protein, which is what we care about as cheese makers.

(00:44:03):

So yeah, it's been a good thing for us.

Andy Chamberlin (00:44:08):

News to me.

George Van Vlaanderen (00:44:10):

You're a veggie guy.

Andy Chamberlin (00:44:11):

Yeah, exactly.

(00:44:12):

You've talked a bit about it already, but what does sustainable agriculture mean to you and what are you doing to achieve it?

George Van Vlaanderen (00:44:22):

Yeah, I guess there's a lot to unpack there. You know, I think when most people think about sustainable agriculture, they think about maintaining resources on the land and enhancing soil quality pasture, and just ideally making the farm better than when you find it or when we started farming.

(00:44:54):

So I'll pause there and say what our focus has been with that, especially recently ... And there are other pieces too, the economic piece, which I think is as important, if not more important for farmers. But in terms of the environmental piece and soil quality, we have been involved with a group called Land Care Cooperative. It's a group of farmers who are basically looking at improving soil quality, water holding capacity, ideally building organic matter through a variety of different means.

(00:45:31):

One of which was we received a grant to purchase what's called a ripsower. This was a piece of technology developed by Abe Collins and some other farmers up to 20 years ago, and that has been commercialized into various iterations of this ripsower, which is essentially a pasture renovation tool that in one pass subsoils, so you're breaking up a plow pan or the hard pan that has been caused by glaciation all over Vermont. You don't need to have plows to create that. So it's breaking that plow pan, it's depositing seed, and also at the same time, we have a bio-stimulant and fertilizer that we're adding to that furrow.

(00:46:25):

So you're going through a pasture, you're ripping up a very small furrow, dropping seed, opening up the plow pan, and we are focusing on really deep-rooted plants like alfalfa, burnet, chicory, red clover. And the idea is that when you break up that plow pan and you're using these deep-rooted forbs and legumes, you're actually kind of accessing a lot of nutrients below that plow pan and moisture. And so when that happens, you have this root development that is kind of colonizing this new territory, so to speak, and there's all sorts of root exudates and microbial interactions that happen as a result of this.

(00:47:22):

So we've seen some amazing benefits to our land, which tends to be very well-drained. We've done several passes with this ripsower. And some of our hayland was just almost primarily orchard grass, the quality was not very good, and we have really just turned around the quality, the moisture holding capacity, just dramatically.

(00:47:51):

And also, the part of that piece is trying to have as many plant families as possible.

Andy Chamberlin (00:48:00):

Hmm.

George Van Vlaanderen (00:48:00):

So when you get beyond ... There's some really good research. When you get-

PART 2 OF 4 ENDS [00:48:04]

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:48:03](#)):

When you get beyond, there's some really good research. When you get beyond four to five different plant families in a sward, you have this synergistic effect in terms of soil quality, moisture-holding capacity, microbial activity, et cetera, et cetera. We've been doing a lot of that recently and that also goes hand in hand with nutrient management and soil testing. We're getting macro and micronutrients and pH dialed in on our fields using this Ripsower to break up that plow pan, using forbes and diversifying species. That's an example of-

Andy Chamberlin ([00:48:39](#)):

You've seen soil tests turn around by using this?

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:48:43](#)):

Yeah, absolutely. Part of that is because we are also amending our soils to... The idea is you can't just go out there and the stuff is like miracle technology, we're putting seed down. You've got to foster, have everything there for that seed to thrive. And we share that technology with three other farms, that piece of equipment, I'm actually going to pick it up today. That's one piece that we've been doing. And then of course, we focused a lot and we've talked about just the pasture management and having goats out. I'm a huge believer in having ruminants, goats, sheep, cows out on pasture, harvesting their own feed, depositing their manure, trampling grass into the ground, so called wasting it. All of that is fostering life in the soil. And over 20 years, we've really seen some great benefits as a result of a lot of these efforts.

([00:49:54](#)):

Back to sustainable agriculture, I think a big part of that is I think myself and Kristen included, we went into agriculture with this idea of wanting this lifestyle and fostering life on our land, et cetera, et cetera. And I think what's often neglected is the income piece and really focusing on the bottom line because you can be the best land steward in the world and if your farm goes bankrupt in five years, it's not going to help anyone, including your land. I think that is a huge piece and often that can mean some compromises in different areas, whether it be lifestyle or something might not be a perfect fit for the... I can't really think of an example, but part of my motto is don't let perfect be the enemy of the good. And we've been venturing into some farm consulting in the last couple of years, and that's something that I've really tried to get farms to really dial in and focus on because... And it's also so hard because like when we started out, you're just in the weeds.

([00:51:24](#)):

It's so hard to poke your head out and identify bottlenecks and things that need to be addressed in order for you to make an income.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:51:42](#)):

Growth to happen.

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:51:43](#)):

And growth, maybe, maybe not. We've been very averse to growing. Pretty much, our entire career, we've had more demand than supply. And my inclination has been to go after that. And my wife has put

the bit in my mouth and rightly so. And I think that has benefited us financially as well because I think we have such a growth mindset in the United States, our a capitalist culture and if you've got a market, you get after it. And I don't think that's always the best thing to do, just not to mention lifestyle, but financially. And what we've done instead is really focus on relatively low volume and high margin. And I think when farms grow, they can get into this middle area where their margins are compromised and they're at this middle volume state. I think I would argue that you either have to be low volume and high margin or very high volume and low margin. You're going to capitalize on economies of scale at that large level, but through that transition, I think people often stall and it can be very difficult.

(00:53:07):

It's been good to pause in that small, staying small and simple. We've got a lean operation.

Andy Chamberlin (00:53:17):

Just refining your systems and growing in profitability, not necessarily herds.

George Van Vlaanderen (00:53:23):

And we've always been pretty averse to debt and very, very self-reliant. We built everything here, our house, our farm, all the buildings, plumbing, electric. And I think if we had taken out a big loan early on, we would have been crushed. We obviously had to take out some debt to purchase the land, et cetera, but I think that could be tricky, especially starting out.

Andy Chamberlin (00:54:00):

Just looping back to the Ripsower, how long have you been using that?

George Van Vlaanderen (00:54:06):

I think this will be... We started, I believe three years ago, we had a workshop on the farm and we had one of the first iterations of the Ripsower. We did some ripping with that unit and then we've done, maybe that was four years ago. I think we've had our own unit, this will be the third year. We've gone over most of our land that we can get that thing on at least twice, and we're going through a third pass in the next week or two.

Andy Chamberlin (00:54:44):

That's something that you do annually?

George Van Vlaanderen (00:54:47):

Yeah. There's one field that is just... We had a workshop two weeks ago on the virtual collars and looking at soil quality and one of our fields is just so beautiful that I think we're going to pause on that because one of the dangers is, you can actually... When you subsoil, you're doing some damage to the existing sward. And we're ripping up these beautiful, deep-rooted plants.

(00:55:21):

I think we're going to pause on that. We might come back to it in subsequent years, but the aim is to go three passes over three or four years and reassess.

Andy Chamberlin (00:55:36):

Have you noticed any challenges or negatives to that practice?

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:55:48](#)):

No. I think there's a learning curve in terms of dialing in the equipment properly, but there's no downsides. I really think we've transformed a lot of our land. I think the best results we've had, we've had good results all around, but as I mentioned before, our land primarily in our main farm, which is the 130 acres we bought originally, is very well drained. And I think the Ripsower is particularly suited to that. The farm that we bought 15 years ago tends to be much heavier soils and the results haven't been so stunning, but still really good. We're going to be ripping that land again.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:56:44](#)):

Not ideal, it's still beneficial.

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:56:48](#)):

Absolutely. No downsides. It's been great for us.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:56:56](#)):

How deep is that set to go?

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:56:59](#)):

We are going about 18 to... I think we'll be going 20 inches. I think you can go up to... I think this unit does 24, perhaps even 30. I don't know exactly because we only have a 52 horse tractor, we're limited in terms of how deep we can actually go. But the idea is you're going a little bit deeper each year. And we've been involved with... I mentioned the Land Care Cooperative, but we've also been involved with the soils group with various farmers from UVM Extensions. We've done a lot of soil testing, a lot of work with penetrometers, which measures the hardness of the soil and just really, really good results with that. We've also been experimenting, we did a small trial with Elastinite, which it's a byproduct of mining, it's calcium silicate, it's used as a liming agent.

([00:58:17](#)):

It's not quite as effective as lime, but it's interesting for a few reasons. One is that it doesn't give off carbon dioxide when it's neutralizing soil. That's a cool thing. The other thing is that there's been a lot of research on feed quality of using calcium silicate. We actually did a small trial where we applied calcium silicate to only half the field, and then we did some forage sampling with the help of UVM Extension and ran those results through AI for statistical analysis. And we were finding statistically significant improvement in feed values from using this calcium silicate, which is super exciting. And actually the Land Care Cooperative, the offshoot of that, there's another company associated with that. They are in the process of developing a relationship with a mine in New York, and hopefully that will be commercially available in Vermont soon.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:59:29](#)):

Is that a powdered product?

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:59:31](#)):

Yeah. You spread it like we just rented a lime spreader and just spread our land. We're going to actually, we're going to spread another load. We've had such good results. We're going to do another load this fall.

Andy Chamberlin ([00:59:44](#)):

Nice. What's the 10-year outlook look like for you and your farm?

George Van Vlaanderen ([00:59:52](#)):

I am 54 right now. I think probably selling the milking herd in 10 years would probably make sense. I really enjoy what I'm doing right now. If I'm still loving it, I'd probably just keep going, but that has some level of attraction. And when that happens, whether it's in 10 years or longer, we would get beef cattle and probably sheep. We wouldn't be milking every day. We thankfully have this retail outlet as our store on site, our farm store on site. We would probably transition to selling lamb and some beef and pork in the store, maintaining our land, continue. We also hay on our property, that's likely.

Andy Chamberlin ([01:01:00](#)):

That's hilarious. You're like, "Yeah, by the time I'm 65, we're going to sell the milking herd," which is like, and then spoken like a true farmer, "But we're just dropping that enterprise. We're going to pick up all these others."

George Van Vlaanderen ([01:01:17](#)):

I love what we're doing and I can see continuing on that role for at least another five to 10 years or longer. We'll see. I mean, part of it is we've worked so hard to build up our land. It would be a shame to not utilize that resource.

Andy Chamberlin ([01:01:38](#)):

And then you run into new technologies like virtual fencing saves you hours and energies.

George Van Vlaanderen ([01:01:45](#)):

Put some cows out with some collars and sheep. It's not that hard.

Andy Chamberlin ([01:01:53](#)):

Game changing.

George Van Vlaanderen ([01:01:55](#)):

That workshop that we had on the virtual fencing, there was a headline, a local paper, it was, "Phone farming," I think was the headline. Technology.

Andy Chamberlin ([01:02:08](#)):

It's not wrong.

George Van Vlaanderen ([01:02:11](#)):

Absolutely.

Andy Chamberlin ([01:02:13](#)):

You've only been doing it a year, but I guess, and we've relied on our cell phone coverage, but has there been any systems down?

George Van Vlaanderen ([01:02:21](#)):

That's a good question. This technology runs exclusively on the cellular network. There's also some Bluetooth features, but we have pretty poor cell connection up here. I'm getting one bar, maybe two bars on our farm, and interestingly, that hasn't changed. Our first year, 2024, what we'd have to do is load the pasture in the evening for the next day. It would take that long, you'd set your paddock on the phone and transmit it to the goats. And they're in the barn and over the night they would receive that data.

Andy Chamberlin ([01:03:07](#)):

Getting the update.

George Van Vlaanderen ([01:03:09](#)):

And for last season, we were still setting up net fence after their milking at night. As I mentioned, they get a fresh paddock after every milking. We were setting up net fence. And I don't know what changed, whether it's the technology, whether they did something, Nofence and Norway did something on their end, but this season we've been able to utilize that Nofence system for both morning and evening, which has been great. It's been awesome. It's been super, super, just been great.

Andy Chamberlin ([01:03:45](#)):

If you had a stronger cell signal, you could update that quickly?

George Van Vlaanderen ([01:03:49](#)):

Yeah. And as I mentioned right now, we're pretty, like there's hardly any limitations. That was a challenge. And that's something, if people are considering this technology, that's something to think about. But again, I would say that the absolute minimum coverage, we are now for whatever reason able to load morning and night. We do have some dead spots on our farm. Generally what we'll do is, it's five o'clock, we need to bring the goats in at 5:30 to get milked and we can move them off of pasture on our phone. And by the time we get out there, they're ready to go. But if it's a dead spot, it just doesn't happen fast enough. There's a Bluetooth feature that we can go down and release them via Bluetooth. One other, you mentioned disadvantages, I think one other thing we've struggled with is goats losing collars.

([01:04:47](#)):

They're in these browse paddocks with saplings and trees and they're rubbing stuff. And it's not uncommon for us to, and they have quick release so they don't get choked. We're losing collars and it has a feature to actually find so you can locate the collar and you can send a little beep if you're close enough. However, if it's in a dead spot, we've actually lost two collars and have been unable to find them. We've moved to bypassing that safety system and clipping in the collars more permanently so we're not constantly having to like go on these search and rescue missions for our collars.

Andy Chamberlin ([01:05:45](#)):

That's important, but at least they're staying together as a herd. Even if they go offline, the goat's not missing, the collar is.

George Van Vlaanderen ([01:05:54](#)):

Absolutely. And even if they don't have cell service, it's loaded on their collar and then it's all GPS. They're contained. Another thing I'll mention about this technology is that it is more reliable in keeping the goats contained. Like we have the world's most powerful energizer from Gallagher, it's like, I forget how many jewels, well over a hundred jewels. A lot of voltage on the fence and goats, if they're agitated or whatever, many of them can still like leap over the fence. And that's just an added bonus for these collars is they really are effective in containing those goats.

Andy Chamberlin ([01:06:39](#)):

Are you able to use those collars to track data on the goat?

George Van Vlaanderen ([01:06:44](#)):

That's actually a great question. We can open up our phone and it has heat signatures where the goats have been in the paddock. What I will do almost without fail is midday, and oftentimes they're anywhere from a half acre to two acre paddock in these silvopastures. And what I will do midday is I'll hop on my bike. I'm a huge bike fan, by the way, for farm efficiency. I bike all over my farm that saves a ton of time, but I'll hop on my bike with a dog or two dogs. I'll drive out to the pasture, I'll get there in less than five minutes. It can be far away. I'll get the goats, bring them to the water, make sure that they're hydrated because they can just get distracted and they're off camping in a nice shady spot.

([01:07:43](#)):

And then I'll drive them, I'll identify where they haven't been in the paddock and use the dogs to drive them into that location so that they're utilizing that forage. And goats, there's a lot of inertia. They'll eat in the morning. Oftentimes if it's hot or whatever, they're just going to hang.

([01:08:07](#)):

They're just in the shade and they're just like lounged there. But as soon as you move them into like an area of good feed, they're like, "This is good." They'll start eating. And since we're not setting up fence every day, we have this extra pool of labor that we can draw on to actually spend 15 minutes at the most to go out there, make sure they're hydrated.

Andy Chamberlin ([01:08:32](#)):

Encourage them.

George Van Vlaanderen ([01:08:33](#)):

Push them into another area and have them eating. And we've done a better job even from last year having the collars. As I said, we're 100% browse right now and our August production this year is even higher, it's considerably higher than it was last year. We're just refining this technology and trying to get the most out of that.

([01:09:02](#)):

And part of that is, as you're asking, like identifying what hasn't been tapped in yet and pushing the animals into that location and getting them to eat.

Andy Chamberlin ([01:09:12](#)):

Are those collars sophisticated enough to track like this one, "This goat has been making this amount of yield," or keep tracking of vaccinations or stuff? I know some of the robo-milkers for cattle is like that.

George Van Vlaanderen ([01:09:29](#)):

No, because that's a different technology because they have a chip or whatever and they can sample milk and production from that cow, but we're old school in the parlor.

Andy Chamberlin ([01:09:43](#)):

Simple.

George Van Vlaanderen ([01:09:48](#)):

We're still tracking that ourselves. But we can see where individual goats have been on the paddock. And they're actually developing, I think it's a prototype right now, but you can actually see movement patterns over a certain paddock, not just where they've heat signatures over time, but like where they're moving and it's pretty neat.

Andy Chamberlin ([01:10:19](#)):

It gives a whole nother perspective of analyzing your land and individual animals.

George Van Vlaanderen ([01:10:27](#)):

And a part of that, which I haven't mentioned, part of this grant and part of our just general interest is we are trying to identify native species that meet certain criteria for our goats. One, most importantly, that they're palatable to goats, like very palatable. They really want them and go after these plants. The second is that they have really high feed value, and the third is that they can withstand browsing pressure. And the one plant that stands out is cup plant, C-U-P, cup plant. It grows to anywhere from eight to 12 feet high, has incredible yields, super pollinator, these beautiful yellow flowers, and my wife Kristen actually started a little cup plant nursery, the seed has to be stratified, meaning it has to go through a winter to germinate. She laid down some black plastic, killed all of the weeds, fertilized it with our compost, and then started this nursery.

([01:11:38](#)):

And then we're taking those root balls, small little root masses and planting those in various places around our farm, as one example. We're actually going to start taking some root cuttings and putting them in the rips from the Ripsower. We're looking at various different Jerusalem artichoke, cup plant, a variety of different.

PART 3 OF 4 ENDS [01:12:04]

George Van Vlaanderen ([01:12:03](#)):

Artichoke, cup plant, a variety of different other plants to diversify what we have out there and provide top quality feed. Ideally, it's self-propagating as well. So, that's been fun.

Andy Chamberlin ([01:12:19](#)):

One thing that makes you and your farm unique is that I see you do things from two different perspectives or almost two different centuries. You're using wireless virtual fencing and at the same time, you're like blacksmithing your own tools and using antique hay equipment. What's your viewpoint or perspective on doing things the old way and the new?

George Van Vlaanderen ([01:12:49](#)):

Yeah. I mean, one of the things we haven't touched on is draft horses. We've utilized draft horses on our farm a lot over the past... we started about 18 years ago. So, up until recently, our team's been getting older, but we cut all of our hay with a team of horses. We tedded with horses, we raked with horses. I was logging every winter. I still do log. I was logging commercially for a while with a team of horses, selling hemlock, shipping hemlock to Canada.

Andy Chamberlin ([01:13:24](#)):

Wow.

George Van Vlaanderen ([01:13:25](#)):

So, that's like as old school as you could possibly get. And so, the view on that is, well, there's two. One is the heart of it is we love horses and working with horses brings us satisfaction and joy. So, there's the art of horsemanship. And that's divorced from technology, but I would also argue that that is a very appropriate technology at our scale. So, we probably had maybe less than \$2,000 invested in haying equipment, and we just got started doing that. So, it's a very low cost to start making hay as opposed to 20X or whatever. And then also, even back then, we're a mixed power operation. So, we've always had a tractor. So, we bale with a tractor, but just one example, Kristen, what we'll do is we'll finish tedding. And oftentimes, Krit will harness up the horses and Kristen will go out and start raking. And I'm coming back and getting the baler set up. And so, while she's raking, I'm out there with a tractor and I'm starting to bale. Oftentimes, we're under pressure for weather reasons. And then she's done raking and she can harness up a team, get a haywagon while I'm on the tractor. So, you have this synergistic effect with the two different forms of power. In terms of the woods, like horses in the woods are amazing, very low footprint. You can get in and out of areas where you can't with a tractor.

([01:15:20](#)):

So, on small acreage, it's, I would argue a very appropriate technology. So, there's that. And at the same time, I've always been, I would say, an early adopter of technology. When YouTube came along, I was like, it's a freaking game changer. I mean, I started off trying to like... I didn't know anything about building. We had like a book that we would refer to and try to figure stuff out and asking lots of questions. And so, when YouTube came along, I just really started utilizing that. And then the virtual fencing.

([01:16:00](#)):

And then I use AI frequently for farm work and for a whole host of different ways in terms of troubleshooting mechanical issues on a tractor to electrical code, like what size breaker do I need for this amount of amperage or whatever. There's just accessing that technology, taking pictures of a barcode on a part and trying to identify that much more quickly than trying to get online and figure that out. AI is not an oracle, it's not flawless, but it's been a-

Andy Chamberlin ([01:16:47](#)):

Helpful tool.

George Van Vlaanderen ([01:16:48](#)):

... an absolute, yeah, absolutely helpful tool in terms of maximizing efficiency and doing the stuff that I don't really like. I don't like sitting at the computer. So, if I can cut that time down, that's been great. So, I'm totally open to adopting new technologies and also just relying on old technology like horses and

dogs. No robot is going to replace a border collie ever. I'll stand by that. So, I think it's a matter of judiciously choosing what works for your operation and being open to different modes of technology.

Andy Chamberlin ([01:17:36](#)):

Yeah. I like following you on Instagram, because it's almost a look into history when you're doing something with the horses. Do you see that or sharing of that technology as like showing a piece of history or is that just you're passionate about horses and like to do it, so that's why you do it?

George Van Vlaanderen ([01:17:56](#)):

Yeah. I mean, there's some of the history part. I mean the whole social media thing, I doubled down on social media when our farmer's market folded. So, I was like, "Okay, we got to do something to..." And so, ostensibly, that's to promote our products, et cetera. But man, that gets tedious and boring. So, I'm posting stuff that I'm passionate about and that I'm into. And one of those horses and dogs feature large in that sense. And then, yeah, I'm also a big, big advocate. I talked to you about some consulting work I've done. I'm a huge advocate for farmers being self-reliant and developing a host of skills. I would argue that we cannot afford to be hiring... I've become much more efficient in a lot of these things.

([01:19:01](#)):

But when I started off, it might have taken me four to five times the amount of hours it would an electrician to wire up my cheese facility or whatever, but my hourly rate was so low that I'm still ahead of the game. And I'm in the process of learning...

Andy Chamberlin ([01:19:22](#)):

You get faster every time.

George Van Vlaanderen ([01:19:23](#)):

Yeah, you're learning a skill and that can be utilized and like when something goes wrong on my farm, I built it. So, I have an intimate knowledge of what the system is and I can go in there and fix it. And the other piece with that too is like, man, it's getting harder and harder to actually find tradespeople to come onto the farm and do work. Welding, mechanical, wiring, plumbing. So, yeah, I post some of that stuff as well, like day to day, this is shit that has to get done in terms of maintaining and fixing equipment.

Andy Chamberlin ([01:20:11](#)):

Part of the resiliency, if something breaks, you need to fix it because it's a key tool.

George Van Vlaanderen ([01:20:15](#)):

Absolutely. And it's also like, that's one of the things I dig about farming is the problem solving part of it is you're faced with these issues and how do you utilize resources on hand and ingenuity to forge into new territory and make it work. So, I like that stuff.

Andy Chamberlin ([01:20:41](#)):

And Mark Fashing, I was talking to him and he really likes to see what you're up to too. And he's like, "Oh yeah, you got to talk to George." So, he sent me some things that he was interested in talking about, so I'm looking at that.

George Van Vlaanderen ([01:20:54](#)):

Right. Yeah, he's a great dude. That was my gateway into your podcast.

Andy Chamberlin ([01:21:01](#)):

Oh, yeah?

George Van Vlaanderen ([01:21:01](#)):

Listening to Mark.

Andy Chamberlin ([01:21:04](#)):

He's like farming with animals, tractors, and implements, not too many youngsters doing that. He really likes your approach to resiliency, problem solving, fixing, repairing, learning key skills like welding, creating Silvopasture brows, having cool systems for... oh, for feeding goats in the barn, we didn't talk about that.

George Van Vlaanderen ([01:21:26](#)):

Yeah.

Andy Chamberlin ([01:21:27](#)):

Yeah. So, what's the neat system that you've got for feeding the goats in the barn?

George Van Vlaanderen ([01:21:34](#)):

Yeah. I mean, I came up with this hay feeder that is, it's like a piece of plywood on a table. So, you have a four by eight sheet of plywood. You can envision that as a kind of a low table and then you can envision a stud wall made out of two by fours that surround this table, almost like a caged table. And so, the goats have to put their head into that feeder. These are goat feeders to eat. And goats love to pull hay out and step all over it, and hay is expensive. So, it's been like a constant battle in terms of like, "What is the feeding system?" And there's been so many iterations, but that has been the best. And then recently, last year was the first year we started feeding wrapped round bales. So, we don't put up all of our own hay.

([01:22:33](#)):

We don't have enough land. We're a certified organic farm. It was increasingly hard to find certified organic square bales, where the round bale market is much more broad in terms of availability. So, at any rate, instead of a four by eight sheet, I put two four by eight sheets. So, I've got eight by eight sheet, again, that's on the ground, if you will. So, you've got this platform surrounded by a stud wall that the goats can put their heads in and there's a piece of plywood along the bottom of the wall, so that they can't pull feet out and step on it. And then I have my two square bale feeders as wings off of that eight by eight round feeder. So, I can take that and throw hay into those feeders. So, maybe that's what he said.

Andy Chamberlin ([01:23:39](#)):

Yeah, yeah, nice. Knowing what you know now, what advice would you give yourself when you started?

George Van Vlaanderen ([01:23:55](#)):

Yeah, that's a good, good question. I think advice number one, don't buy goats right off the bat. I mean...

Andy Chamberlin ([01:24:03](#)):

You get a roof over your head first.

George Van Vlaanderen ([01:24:07](#)):

Yeah. I mean, there's so many dumb things we did. We spent a lot of time messing with those goats when we could have been more efficiently building our farm up. And so, there's that. There's so many mistakes we made with the original building or facility was a pole barn. I eventually tore all the guts out of that and had to rebuild that. Start off building things the right way. I guess I didn't know the right way until later. Yeah. I think we followed some of the things, our own advice that some of the tenants were, we don't want to start off with a lot of debt. If things went south, we could walk away without losing our home and our shirt. And so, stay the course. That would be my advice to my old self, and I think more or less, we did that.

Andy Chamberlin ([01:25:22](#)):

Do you have any other different advice that you'd give to a young farmer now?

George Van Vlaanderen ([01:25:28](#)):

Yeah, I'm a huge advocate of value added. I think it's very difficult and certainly not impossible, but to step into commodity agriculture and make that sustainable and profitable, I think if you can develop a unique product that gives you a little more leeway to command a higher price and to find a marketing niche, I think that's super important. So, part of my advice would be to really consider value added as a viable option, or certainly an offshoot to the main operation. I would say limit as much as possible, the amount of debt that you go into. I think focus on skills and self-reliance, as opposed to hiring stuff out right from the get go.

([01:26:42](#)):

I think there's a great model to grow slowly, and that goes hand in hand with being debt averse. You're not going to get your farm off and running and able...

Andy Chamberlin ([01:26:57](#)):

With limited cash flow.

George Van Vlaanderen ([01:26:58](#)):

Yeah, able to sustain a family right off the bat and I think that's okay. That's just my own personal experience. Obviously, there are different viewpoints on that, but I think those are some of the main ones. The other piece huge is where are you going to sell your product? How far is your market? I think developing a wholesale market, I think a lot of farms go right into a farmer's market and I don't always think that's necessarily the best path. They're low obstacles into getting into a market as opposed to really developing a wholesale market and approaching vendors and restaurants. And that can be a slog whereas you can pay your fee and set up your booth and start selling stuff.

([01:27:59](#)):

But I think the opportunity costs of that can be pretty high. When you look at the fees associated with going to a farmer's market, when you look at your labor and transportation costs, you've got to be pulling in a good amount of money to really, I think, make that a profitable venture. Because every hour that you're at that market and preparing, and that's not even counting the prep that goes into market, that's arguably time that could have been spent developing other marketing aspects. And I think, so that's something to consider for farms. We started off doing like, I don't know, three or four markets. Yeah, it's crazy. Again, we were struggling and just trying to figure it out.

[\(01:28:56\)](#):

But I think back to my advice to my younger self, advice would be get into some wholesale markets and make that the mainstay of your income and perhaps mix in a really good profitable market with a value added product like sausages, or something else. But yeah, so I think those are some pieces that I would advise young farmers to do.

Andy Chamberlin [\(01:29:42\)](#):

And that was the Farmer's Share. I hope you enjoyed this episode with George of Doe's Leap Farm. The Farmer's Share is supported by a grant offered by the USDA Specialty Crop Block Program from the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets. This funding helps to cover some of my time and travel in order to produce this podcast until March of 2026. The USDA Agricultural Marketing Service supports projects that address the needs of US specialty crop growers and strengthens local and regional food systems. I have no doubt that this podcast will meet those needs and help educate growers to support the industry.

[\(01:30:21\)](#):

If you enjoy this show and want to help support its programming, you can make a one-time or reoccurring donation on our website by visiting thefarmersshare.com/support. We also receive funding from the Vermont Vegetable and Berry Growers Association. The VVBGA is a nonprofit organization funded in 1976 to promote the economic, environmental, and social sustainability of vegetable and berry farming in Vermont. Their membership includes over 400 farms across Vermont and beyond, as well as about 50 businesses and organizations that provide products and services of all types to their members.

[\(01:31:05\)](#):

Benefits to members include access to the VVBGA Listserv to buy, sell plants and equipment, share farming information, and tap the vast experience of our growers. Access the community accreditation for produce safety, also known as CAPS. This program is designed for growers by growers to help you easily meet market and regulatory food safety expectations. You can access the VVBGA's soil health platform where you can organize all the soil tests and create and store your soil amendment plans and records, access to webinars for growers in the VVBGA annual meeting, an email subscription to the Vermont Vegetable and Berry Newsletter. Camaraderie, enhanced communication and fellowship among commercial growers.

[\(01:31:54\)](#):

Memberships are on a per farm per calendar year basis and annual dues this year are \$ 80. These funds pay for the organization's operating costs and support educational programs and research projects. These funds also support projects that address grower needs around ag engineering, high tunnel production, pest management, pollinators, produce safety, and soil health. Become a member today to be a part of and further support the veg and berry industry. You can visit thefarmersshare.com to listen to previous interviews or see photos, videos, or links discussed from the conversation. If you don't want

to miss the next episode, enter your email address on our website and you'll get a note in your inbox when the next one comes out.

[\(01:32:42\)](#):

The Farmer's Share has a YouTube channel with videos from several of the farm visits. We're also on Instagram and that's where you can be reminded about the latest episode or see photos from the visit. Lastly, if you're enjoying the show, I'd love it if you could write a review. In Apple Podcasts, just click on the show, scroll down to the bottom and there, you can leave five stars in a comment to help encourage new listeners to tune in. I'd also encourage you to share this episode with other grower friends or crew who you think would be inspiring for them. Thanks for listening.

PART 4 OF 4 ENDS [01:33:23]