

a girl
&
her goats

by Kerry Diamond
photos by Annabel Mehran

LIFE ON THE FARM
WITH LOUISA CONRAD



If you daydream about the farm life, there's a place and a couple you need to know about. It's Big Picture Farm, an idyllic spot in Townshend, Vermont, run by Louisa Conrad and Lucas Farrell. The two met in college, fell in love with each other, and also fell in love with... goats.

Yes, goats. You might not think much about these creatures, but Conrad and Farrell do. They have dozens of Saanens, Alpines, and Nubians and make award-winning caramels and cheeses from their milk. These two truly modern farmers also have a solid social media game and share their lives – and the goats' – via Instagram, a blog, and even a goat cam. Through their eyes, and Conrad's paintbrush (her artwork of the goats is on the caramel packaging and on the Big Picture website), you'll gain a whole new respect for these animals. Who knew goats were so beautiful, joyful, and full of personality? Who knew being a goat herder could seem like such a magical career?

Spreading this message is part of the plan. "Our mission is to integrate agriculture and narrative in a fresh way that properly evokes the place, animals, and work in order to bring to life the exciting and unpredictable evolution of our products, farm, and lives. Each caramel or cheese that we produce comes from a place, a specific place, and is made from the milk of a specific animal, eating specific flowers and leaves and plants at a specific time of year," they explain on their website. "Our goal is spelled out in our name: to provide our customers with the rich context surrounding our products (aka 'the big picture')."

We had a million questions for Conrad about her farm life and her "kids," but we narrowed it down and she was gracious enough to answer, despite her crazy late spring schedule at Big Picture. And those farm daydreams? Conrad might just inspire you to make them a reality.

First off, your caramels are amazing. How and when did you decide to get into the candy business?

Our dive into farming was pretty random. I have always loved cheese, and when a gap in our schedules popped up, we asked some local goat farmers we knew if they were taking apprentices. They hired us and while helping them make cheese and tend to their herd we fell in love with the rhythm of farm life and the mystical magical souls of goats. We were hooked.

We were also daunted by the cheese landscape in Vermont. There are SO many incredible artisans already making outrageous product that we were on a mission to find a way to do something different that would allow us to co-habitate with a bunch of goats! So the goats started it all, but it just so happens that their milk is perfectly suited for confections.

Did you have any prior candy-making experience?

Decidedly not! I was teaching art to little kids in a variety of after-school and artist-in-the-schools programs and my husband was a poet adjuncting at Middlebury College before we became farmers. That being said, I cannot deny that I have an incredible sweet tooth. Or 20... I made had caramel for nine months before I felt like I had come close to getting it right.

You have a full-time candy maker onsite now, right?

We do these days. We have a creamery manager. She makes caramel and cheese for us as well as managing our other part-time caramel makers.



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: CONRAD WITH ONE OF THE FARM CATS; FEEDING THE HERD; HER ARTWORK FOR THE CARAMEL PACKAGING; MILKING STATIONS; ONE OF THE FARM'S MAREMMAS, A BREED OF ITALIAN SHEEPDOGS.



How is making cheese different from making caramel?

They are both pretty magical processes. You start with this rich, creamy milk that you work so hard to make sure is coming from the happiest goats eating the most incredible diet of raspberry leaves, strawberry flowers, clovers, vetch, buttercups, saplings of any sort, bark of any sort, I could go on and on. I'm obsessed with the milk. Milk is our medium. At any rate, in both processes the milk transforms dramatically. Cheese making involves a lot less heat and is more physical. While stirring the curd you are elbow deep in milk, so it is much more tactile. Sculptural even. It is such a delicate object and the affinage component is endlessly fascinating. The caramel takes the milk to a further extreme, and the science of caramelization is fascinating in its own right, as the milk fats and overall chemistry of the milk shift over the course of the goats' seasonal lactation. In both cases, the recipes are constantly shifting in reaction to the life of the ingredients, the diet of the animals, and the changing flora and weather. There's a lot of uncertainty; but the trick is to treat the uncertainty as part of a singular, complicated, and beautiful rhythm.

A big part of your life is goats. Tell us something most people don't know about these animals.

Goats form the most amazing bonds with their family members. It has brought us a lot of happiness to see generations of goat families interact here on the farm. Also, they have rectangular pupils, which supposedly allows them to see in the dark.

Why did you decide raising goats was the way to go, versus





another animal or a specific crop?

There was never a non-goat option. Though I will admit that in the beginning of the farm dreams, a dye garden and dried flower farm was high up on the list. I did a lot of felting and was sure I wanted to be in the textile business. I won't deny part of me still does. There is time. And each year I plant a few more dye plants. Truth be told though, by the time the fourth quarter rolls around we are so busy making caramel that everything else often gets put on hold. And yet it is nice to have things to dream about in the winter when the farm is all quiet. I love the winter.

How many goats are on the farm?

We have 32 milkers, plus a few retired goats just kicking it and hanging out. And we currently still have 20 or so kids, though that number will likely drop to around five kids by the end of the summer. It takes time to find good homes for everybody.

You also have cats and dogs.

We have two incredible dogs named Josie and Elvis. They are Maremmas, which have been guarding sheep in Italy for thousands of years. They live outside, with the goats, year round. We also have two barn cats named Thunder and Lightning. They take their job very seriously.

Any other animals?

We have around 30 hens. And in the past we have had a llama and pigs, but not at the moment.

How do you and your husband divide responsibilities?

It has been an evolution. I've always been in charge of the caramel and cheese production. He is more responsible for the health of the herd and fixing everything. Things are always breaking when you have a farm and do your own manufacturing. So he tinkers everywhere. I tend the garden, but he is in charge of turning all the goat bedding into the black gold compost that grows it all. It is all pretty symbiotic. I make all the graphics, but he is the one with the computer skills to convert everything into vectors and print-ready files for the printers.

People fetishize the farm life today. What's that all about?

Yeah. I think a lot of people are curious about the rural life and making their own food. And I think with the Internet it seems possible for so many more people to leave the city, to live a different life. The Internet and social media also make it super easy to fetishize a lot of things. It is possible to paint a landscape of your life where it is always sunny, the apple trees are always blooming, things never go wrong. Of course, things are always going wrong; but that is not what I enjoy sharing on the Internet. I don't want to be whiny, I just want folks to enjoy seeing smiling goat faces. I want to focus on the positives—as opposed to, say, the media always highlighting the negatives; to help tilt the universe slightly in joy's direction for a change. Consequently, I definitely don't portray the downs of farming. The times when the moms are separated from their kids and they wail for days. Or when our backs feel broken, but we still have manual labor to do. But even on the hard days, it is honest work. And going to bed totally exhausted always feels good.

From your vantage point, what is the state of small family farms today?

I think it is a really daunting but exciting time for small family farms. I think there is a huge demand for farm life—people

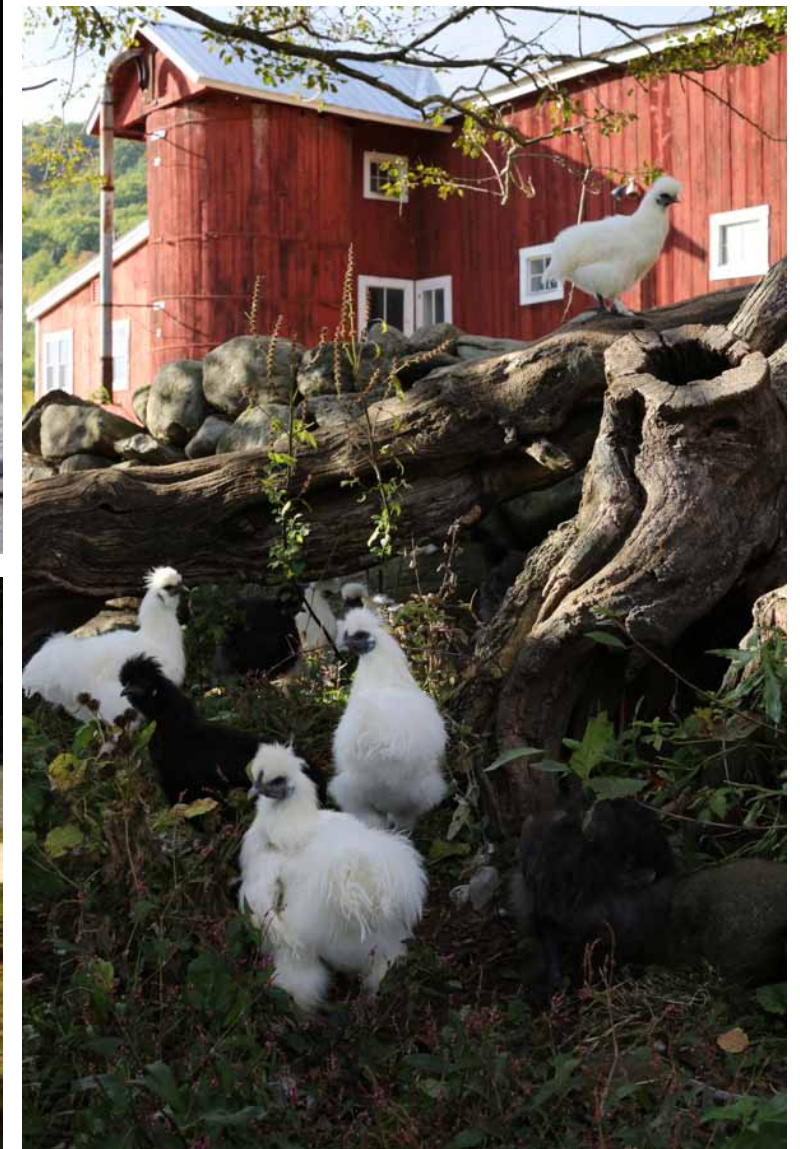
literally want to be able to taste it—and therefore it is becoming easier in some respects to find an audience since appreciation for sustainability is pretty widespread. That said, the agricultural industry in this country still has a long way to go when it comes to embracing small farms and creative value-added ventures. I think the momentum is growing, though.

What have you learned about the business of farming?

It is tough to make the numbers work. We were lucky in that as we were applying for farmland (we were working with organizations like the Vermont Land Trust and finding assistance through local food grants), we spent a lot of time on our business plan, which was, in retrospect, really important. Essential. Having worked for a few dairy farms before starting our own, we also had a good, if somewhat vague, notion of the realities of meeting your bottom line.

Do you know other young female farmers? Do you have a support system for advice, sharing ideas, commiserating?

Yes! I spent a year after college working at the Vermont Studio Center in Johnson. Two of the lady artists I worked with there went on to become farmers. I always looked at their lives and wished I could do the same but was too scared. I knew nothing of farming, I grew up in NYC, how could I be a farmer? They inspired me and rendered it possible. And once you are in the farming world you quickly discover that there are female farmers everywhere doing amazing things. Hannah Sessions at Blue Ledge Farm and Ann Works at Peaked Mountain Farm were



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT:
CONRAD AND HER HUSBAND,
LUCAS FARRELL; A BARN KITTEN;
FREE RANGE CHICKENS;
MILKING THE GOATS; THE HERD
OUT TO GRAZE.



both mentors. And I have a set of female farm friends I email and commiserate with for sure. We don't get together as often as one might hope. The farms tend to keep you on lockdown.

What do you wish you knew when you started?

That is a tough one. I was a hesitant farmer. I was terrified of being tied to a place and never being able to leave. Up until we settled at the farm we were wanderers, always on the go. I used to say that my five-year plan was to be in Paris. This was clearly delusional.

Do you have time to work on your art?

Not at this moment. But it does feel within reach these days. Each winter seems to bring a bit more calm than the one before it and we always have high hopes that the next one is when we will dive into our artistic practices more fully. That being said, I walk around with my camera strapped to my back. Five years living on this hill with this set of animals has accumulated a pretty incredible and interesting archive of images. I'm sure I'll do something with it someday more than just use it as propaganda to sell caramels.

Even though you're on a farm, you're pretty connected thanks to the social media you do. Even with that, do you ever feel removed from the rest of civilization? Or is removed the wrong word?

I mean, I get lonely, sure. But I don't feel that I actually have time for any more socializing than I do! We have a lot of friends visit the farm from out of town. And yes, with the Internet it is possible to stay very up to date on just about everything. I definitely do not feel removed from civilization. Do I crave a spot to get a latte? Sure. But I've gotten better over the years about accepting what rural living does offer and no longer craving the things it doesn't.

Do you have a favorite season or time of year on the farm?

Ah. I love them all. Winter is so long. It is like a really great friend that you love love to hang out with but who always seems to overstay their welcome. It is quiet and cozy and sleepy

and the animals are peaceful and we read by the fire. We always rise with the sun, so in the winter it feels so glorious to sleep until 7. Spring is intoxicating when it arrives. The mountain is so overloaded with old craggy apple trees that you could quite literally get drunk on the fumes they put off. It is glorious, but so short lived. And summer. Summer has all the food, and the dinners in the fields, and mushroom-foraging hikes late into the evening and dips in the river and just endless work from dawn until dusk. It does have bugs.

The fall. The fall is my favorite. I love a good wool sweater and the hillsides look they are on fire. There is a sadness to fall too. You watch the goats' supply of food quickly diminishing before your eyes and you quite literally feel like the squirrel madly trying to stow away all the acorns before the snow falls. I always feel like we do not have enough hay to get us through those long six months, but so far we have always made it. Phew.

What is the hardest thing about having a farm?

The emotional rollercoaster of it all. Trying to keep the books balanced. Being responsible for so many lives of so many goats. Having that responsibility conflict with things you might want to do, like go on a vacation off-farm. Or having conflicting farm responsibilities when you really need to get off-farm because a relative is sick or celebrating a big birthday.

What's the best part of farm life?

Honestly, I just smiled reading this question. I love farm life. Even if I was hesitant to throw myself into it, I am now fully hooked. I love waking up every morning in such a spot and looking out the window and watching the orchard slowly get older. It has been satisfying to watch the landscape evolve— with help from us, help from the goats. And it keeps you on your toes. There is never a dull moment. There are plenty of challenges. Mentally, physically, financially. But there is never a boring day and there is never a day without tasty food.

