

Awash in Cashmere

In the hills of Tuscany, a lone American is churning cashmere goat's milk into a soapy profit.

PHOTOS BY DAVIDE MAESTRI

At first glance, Nora Kravis might seem like just another American expatriate on her sunny 17-acre Tuscan farm—if it weren't for the 89 cashmere goats and the barn crammed with soap bars and bubble wrap.

Kravis, 51, is the sole cashmere-goat breeder in Italy, as well as the inventor of the only beauty products in the world containing milk from the prized animals. In addition to scarves and shawls, her Chianti Cashmere Company produces all-natural milk soaps and moisturizers, some scented with local herbs.

"The first year I had the goats, I produced just 10 kilos of cashmere fiber," Kravis says as she guides visitors through her organic farm, La Penisola, situated outside the town of Radda in Chianti. "You can make scarves from that, but not a lot of money. So the soap was an interesting idea."

But what started as a curiosity now seems to be paying off. "I started going from one local hotel to another, begging them to put the soaps in their bathrooms," she says. "It was very hard to convince them, so I cut up the bars into little pieces and put sample baskets at the desks. The guests kept emptying the baskets and finally the hotels started to sell it in their shops."

Now those very hotels are providing her with so many orders that her extra barn has become a warehouse, and Kravis has an assistant who spends hours hand-labeling the products. The soap is now sold in cashmere stores in Chianti and Florence, and online at chianticashmere.com. The big crunch began last summer, when representatives from Neiman Marcus drove up Kravis' kilometer-long driveway to court her. Buyers from the prestigious Italian beauty company Santa Maria Novella weren't far behind.

But Kravis is ambivalent about the business' rapid growth. She still rises at dawn to milk the goats herself. After it's shipped to a laboratory for hydrolization, the milk travels to two factories in northern Italy, where the bars are cut and stamped. This year Kravis is planning to launch a sunscreen product, using the goat milk as a skin softener.

"I never thought it was going to get bigger than a local thing," says Kravis. "I've always done this on my own..." Before she can finish the sentence, a neighbor calls to tell her some of her herd have wandered away. She races off into the hills to round up her precious flock.

—JACKIE COOPERMAN

Kravis' farm, La Penisola, overlooks the lush Volpaia valley in the Italian region of Chianti.



Kravis with her fourth-generation cashmere goats Darlin' and Diva



Clockwise from left: The packaging for the hand soaps is designed by Kravis; liquid soap in glass bottles; spools of cashmere wool; just kidding around on the farm.

