



● in the money

Milk Made

When Nora Kravis's cashmere business flopped, she started to clean up—with goat-milk soap

Preteen girls are always mortified by their moms, but 18-year-old Samantha Kravis, who grew up on a goat farm in Chianti, Italy, thought she had it worse than most. Eight years ago, "the other mothers would pick up their kids from school in high heels and full makeup, but I'd have my work clothes and boots on," says her mother, Nora Kravis, a transplanted American. "Sammy said, 'You embarrass me,' and I said, '[Okay], I won't get out of the car.' She was satisfied."

"When I start something, I refuse to give up," says Kravis (at home with her herd).

PHOTOGRAPHS BY G. DE' MICHELUGRAZIA NERI

Professional satisfaction for Kravis, now 52, took a little longer. A few years later this single mom was struggling to build a cashmere business. But when her modest herd didn't produce enough of the fluffy stuff she had a brainstorm: use the goats' milk to make soaps and lotions. Today Kravis's premium Chianti Cashmere Company products, sold at Britain's House of Fraser department stores and specialty shops as well as through her Web site, have won her a devoted, dewy-skinned following. Goat-milk skin care may sound icky, but customers can't get enough of Kravis's wholesome-looking soap with rosemary, sage and bay leaf. Says Emma Parker, a spokeswoman for House of Fraser: "It works. Goat's milk is renowned for leaving the skin rejuvenated." Says Samantha: "All along I've thought my mother's been crazy. But she's made this a success."



Kravis and her assistant Antonella Rossi hand-wrap soaps in parchment paper.

Kravis acquired her first three goats in 1990, hoping they would eat the blackberry bushes overrunning her property, which she had bought in 1972, outside the village of Radda. But the animals multiplied, and she couldn't bear to have them slaughtered. So she crossbred them with cashmere goats from Scotland. "My grandiose plan," she chuckles, "was to become the central cashmere goat-breeding farm in the Mediterranean."

Alas, the hair from one goat proved enough for just one shawl a year. Floundering financially, Kravis started making soap using recipes she found on a trip to New England. After some false starts (her first batch smelled like "something I wouldn't wash my face in"), her business was on its way. She and an assistant now package the products, which are made with her goats' milk in local factories, in the barn beside Kravis's farmhouse. Prices range from \$5 for a small bar of soap to \$50 for a gift pack, and she expects the venture to net \$30,000 to \$50,000 this year. "My business has exploded," marvels Kravis.

That's thanks to hard work and serendipity, not to any grand plan. The animal-loving third child of Ludlow, a commercial artist, and Geraldine, a French teacher (both now deceased), Kravis grew up in Manhasset, N.Y., dreaming of one thing—"Living in a country house," she says. Captivated by Italy during a college stint studying art in Rome, she returned to the country to work as a riding instructor in Tuscany before coming upon her farmhouse, La Penisola. "I felt like I was home," says Kravis, who bought the 18th-century house with stable for \$10,000. "People couldn't wait to get out of these stone farms. There was no electricity, no running water. They thought I was from outer space."

After her first frigid winter, Kravis decamped to Pisa to attend veterinary school. Working as a vet back in La Penisola in 1982, she gave birth to Samantha, her daughter with then-boyfriend Richard Birkett, who was teaching in Siena. Birkett, 42, is now an accountant in London, near where Samantha recently moved to attend high school.



Kravis (on her patio) still does veterinary work when her neighbors ask, saying "How can I say no?"

Now Kravis (who is dating a marble-quarry owner) hopes to breed hundreds more goats, restarting her cashmere enterprise even as she expands her skin-care business. She'll still milk her goats at dawn herself—a mixed blessing. "I have to catch them first," she says. "But I like the physical contact. And baby kids being born—you see this little blob and all of a sudden it stands up. It really is amazing."

By Kim Hubbard, Liz Corcoran in Radda and Eileen Finan in London

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