

DISCOVER

The Cashmere Republic of Chianti

An American's 30-Year-Old Rural Tuscan Dream Has Come True For Dozens of Goats, the EU and Herself

By Elaine Eliah
SPECIAL TO ITALY DAILY

The kitchen table is cluttered beyond redemption, with only edges of a red tablecloth peeking out beneath heaps of paper. Lifting up a stray bedsheet reveals a few secrets about this strange place, including the family trees of such four-legged creatures as "Bobby Dazzler," "Prince Phillip," and "Chinaman."

"They sent me photographs of their top-producing males and I picked the ones I liked best," explains veterinarian Nora Kravis. "I keep the semen frozen in liquid nitrogen. They're in the goat barn, want to see them?"

Welcome to "Chianti Cashmere," a slice of Tuscan hillside turned goat farm. Kravis, born and raised in America, not only produces cashmere from the animals' wool, but she has taken their milk on to worldwide markets in the form of fine soaps and skin-care products.

But focusing on the marketing success of her soaps and creams would miss the real significance of Kravis's cashmere farm.

A few years ago, China banned the export of raw cashmere, pressuring

manufacturers outside the country to relocate their garment-producing technology there. Indeed, many large Italian fabric makers did.

Soon afterward, in 1993, the European Union set up the European Fine Fiber Network to promote local production of one of the continental fashion industry's most precious materials.

Then illness swept Asian



goatherds, killing many animals and forcing still more to be destroyed. Now more than ever, Kravis says, Europe needs to establish an alternative supply of cashmere.

But Kravis started planning her farm long before China started getting tough with cashmere.

It's been nearly 30 years since this self-described "social refugee" from America bought into 17 Tuscan acres. That was back when the town of Radda in Chianti had three bars, no streetlights and no tourists, a time when, "under the Tuscan sun," meant, at least for this Long Island native, a tent, no electricity, and no running water.

"The kitchen used to be a pig sty," she recalls. "The pigs were still here when I bought the place. The owner butchered them when he left."

Here, warming herself beside her new wood stove, Kravis finally has a chance to relax. She's finished hauling hay for the day, and done chasing the "kids" around.

"It's the first time I've been able to afford to heat this place," she says about her recent investment.

Nora Kravis's cashmere farm in Radda in Chianti, which she started planning 30 years ago, is now home to 58 pregnant goats. The first 10 came from Scotland.

She chucks aside a pair of veterinarian's gumboots and turns her attention to putting the kitchen table in order.

These days, Kravis now runs not only a successful farm, but also a bed-and-breakfast and a small operation that breeds Bolognese dogs, small and furry creatures that look something like a Bichon Frise.

It wasn't an overnight success. Looking back on the history of the place, she recalls the two summers she tented with her young daughter so she could eventually afford to rent a house. Then there were the seven delightful years converting a cold pig sty into a now-warm kitchen. And any true entrepreneur couldn't help but appreciate some of Kravis's creative financing, which included everything from post-dated checks for a shipment of soap to ten friends who pitched in for the first ten Scottish cashmères.

There were other hurdles as well. Because of strict zoning laws in the area, her goat barn, which had to be built of stone, cost almost four times what it might have cost elsewhere.

Although the European Union offered subsidies to goat farmers like herself to get started, bureaucratic hurdles kept her from qualifying for them in time, she says.



The first wave of goats arrived five years ago. Today, Kravis, "Prince Phillip," and "Bobby Dazzler" eagerly await the offspring of 58 pregnant goats. Come April, there ought to be 70 kids cavorting around the farm.

That's when the tourist season at Kravis's farm starts to build, and those who haven't booked accommodation before then might find standing room only.

There's nothing artificial about this place, but the products right down to the wholesome living. As one guest commented, "I can see why you don't have a television. You don't need one."

Kravis wouldn't have time to watch one. The lonely goatherder turned cottage-industry matriarch has her hands full. From the first batch of soap, "that had to be thrown out," she says, to a marketable commodity in 1998, Kravis created and produces a full line of elegantly-packaged skin care products that are now starting to attract world attention.

The herd is still too small to generate significant quantities of cashmere fiber — even a quality goat only produces about 200 grams a year, which translates to three 70 gram scarves or one lightweight sweater. Kravis's goat milk products help her keep the farm going. So do

her four Bolognese dogs, whose prolific breeding have made more than a few mortgage payments.

This spring, she'll introduce a new line of cashmere scarves, shawls and throws, all hand-woven locally. Starting this April, visitors will be able to bottle-feed their own adopted kid.

In a new entrepreneurial twist, Kravis is trying to figure out a way to rent out goats for brush removal, and to provide organic composting and fertilizing services. She's even dreamed up a scheme to provide four-legged lawnmowing crews for the autostrada. They would come complete with reflective vests.

In Italy, goats have traditionally been the domain of poor farmers. But with prospects improving, people from all over are asking Kravis, Italy's only cashmere goat breeder, how they, too, can start a herd.

She explains that the animals are happy just about anywhere there's water and something to chew, so the availability of land becomes the biggest factor.

Indeed, suburban sprawl has even started to encroach on Kravis's farmland. Acreage has become increasingly tight and prohibitively expensive in Tuscany, a factor which will likely produce the next hurdle to Kravis's dream herd of 1,000 goats.