

Maggidan's Magnificent Milking Minis
By Maggie Leman

I have been milking my pygmy goats for 4 years now and do I have a story to tell!

To begin, Dan and I have been raising and showing our pygmies for nearly 13 years now. The most asked question at fairs and such is always, "What do you do with them? What are they good for?" I would give the NPGA pat answer of, "They are wonderful homestead livestock, giving both milk and meat. And being small they require less room, less feed and are easier to handle." Several years ago another wonderful little goat came on the scene, the Nigerian Dwarf Dairy Goat. Lots of pygmy breeder wanted to try their hand at milking, so they jumped on the Nigerian Dwarf bandwagon. Dan and I didn't want to maintain 2 different breeds, with different husbandry requirements, and for years I had been saying Pygmy Goats were good milk goats. I had handmilked a few, 3 or 4, enough to know they could produce well and we sampled homemade goat cheese, yogurt and ice cream, YUMMY!

Now some does have very tiny teats, but I could see from the litter of kids they would raise, that they apparently gave plenty of milk. So in the spring of 2001 I splurged and bought a milking machine for my birthday. Now I was really committed. The girls took to being machine milked like they had done it all their lives. For such a small goat and not being bred for milk production they did amazingly well. Usually I share with the kids, leaving them with their mom, and milk once a day in the evening. During the kids' first 6 weeks or so I might not get a lot of milk, but when the kids start eating solid food, the does have more left for me. I can be sure the doe is getting enough to eat to support her mob and keep a close eye out for any health problems, and she is in fine shape to start contributing to my milk pail when the kids are less dependent. I get a chance to bond with the kids too, they are very curious about the milking stanchion, jumping up with mom to see what's going on. We always have a few bottle babies and now I had just what Mother Nature intended, real pygmy milk.

The next two seasons I milked from spring until it got too cold in October for me to continue. I could milk all of the does, even the ones with the smallest teats. At times I was milking 16 to 20 does, but with a machine it took lots less time than hand milking and I got lots more milk. The girls seem to prefer the machine as it is always the same pressure and rhythm and it never pinches. We were practically swimming in pygmy milk, getting more than 8 gallons a week (we would drink it all week I usually had 6 to 8 gallons on the weekends to turn into cheese or yogurt). I bought a cheese-making book and proceeded to make the most wonderful, richest, smoothest cheese in the world and yogurt (and frozen yogurt) to die for. I have more colostrum banked than I will ever need, and can offer it to our local vets and veterinary school.

By 2004 our does provided all of our milk, and more than 50 pounds of delicious Chevre and Feta cheese and yogurt. I still have several gallons of milk frozen and with careful slow thawing it is as good as the day I froze it. Chevre freezes well too. At the tail end of the milking season, just before Thanksgiving, I bought a cream separator, so next

season I can make butter. Several of my does could milk for a standard 305 day lactation (this is the standard for dairy goats and Nigerian dwarves), most produce well for at least 8 or 9 months and raise their own kids. Our 2005 season starts in March.

I also get a wonderful bonus for all of the time and trouble I go through to milk. I have the best behaved, tamest, most loving does in the entire pygmy goat world. Even the wild ones, with a little coaxing, become friendly and trusting, and it only takes about a week for them to come around to my way of thinking. The girls gladly jump up on the stanchion to be milked after, not so patiently, waiting in line at the door of the barn. They are a dream in the show ring, going anywhere I lead with barely a pull on the collar.

Milking takes a commitment to do it every single day, but the benefits to both your herd and your family are well worth the trouble. Goat milk is easier to digest, goat cheese is a wonderful treat and the bonding between the does and their keeper is very special. Go ahead and milk those pygmies!