

# Why Save the Shepherd

I have been working in cheese now for many years. I got my start helping my partner put his family's Pecorino Romano (FULVI) and sheep's milk cheeses on the map here in the US and then moved from there to cheese from Spain, later incorporating Portugal and Croatia until recently when we added Swiss cheese.

I have spent so much time in dairies across these countries and it used to be that in La Mancha, we would see that there was a shrinking milk supply, that there was never enough milk and that some people were leaving the profession. I took that to heart but perhaps didn't really digest this as something problematic outside of the region until a few years ago when I heard that there were milk shortages everywhere, and not just in Spain but also in Italy, Portugal and other countries. No one wanted to continue in their families' footsteps and the small dairies were closing for a myriad of reasons.

I was deep in the middle of trying to convince regions in Spain to create a subsidy for the precious Marcona Almond, something to entice growers to want to handle this delicate tree that flowers a full month earlier than all the others when it hit me that we had a real milk problem on our hands.

I dropped the ball in the middle of the fight and put my brain to thinking how to spark a reaction in others to bring to light this terrible lack of milk, the loss of small and medium dairies and of this noble profession.

It became clear to me that we needed to change the image of the milk farmer, that we needed to convey and show it as a noble profession, a cool one. We needed to point out that there are many types of milk farmers and for many reasons and by doing this, perhaps we could save the generational loss as well as entice others to join the ranks.

I have been talking to thousands of people over the years. My goal is to be that spark that ignites others more knowledgeable than myself to act. I started calling the cause "Save the Shepherd" or Salva Pastores although it encompasses any type of milk farmer, also any size from pasture-fed to larger more industrial. We need milk if we want there to be enough cheese in the future. We cannot depend only on artisan, small suppliers either, if we want the cheese to be able to travel outside the country of origin, perhaps outside the local community. The important thing here is to do it with conscientiousness and respecting animal welfare and the environment.

Why do people choose to be milk farmers? Some do it as that is what they know as their families have been doing it for many years. Some do it to protect the land and help it stay healthy and regenerate. Some do it to maintain terroir and tradition and to make sure their homeland is relevant. Some do it as they love animals and the outdoors and do not want to work inside. They see themselves as warriors, loners, part of a fearless group who either roam the mountains, or forage pastures. Some do it as professionals: veterinarians who don't want to work in an office, scientists who are thrilled by applying their don in nature and with animals, computer techs who love the statistics and the ways that you can track the animals, the feed and everything using

computer technology. Some are people choosing to leave their professions and to start anew. All of these allow you to choose your path.

I have spoken with Directors of Agriculture in various regions. I have learned that there are programs that offer help to those wanting to be a milk farmer. Regional help, EU help, lots of opportunities, however you have to dig deep to find these – you need to be resourceful and locate them which is less than ideal. We need to make these programs easier to find.

I learned that there are many organizations who are helping the small producer, those who are pasture fed or wanting to create extensive farming. There are so many ways to find the path that suits you in this industry and I am just trying to be the connector.

I have obtained a couple of articles in the USA and Germany on the subject, and I hope to continue giving value to the Project by speaking with cheese championships, with chefs and more to raise their awareness.

## **VIDEOS**

Since it takes a long time to figure out who to talk to, and I wanted to get the word out, I decided to create a series of videos from the countries I work with. In these videos the very milk farmer says WHY they do what they do. I try to get them to talk about what they like to do when they are not herding the animals. I want them to convey that they live a full life although they also have their hands full with caring for the animals. It's best to let their passion speak for his/herself.

In Basilicata shepherds have been declared “Defenders of the Territory” and I attended a one-day seminar talking with shepherds and milk farmers about the challenges, trying to give ideas and positive energy to continue on. They made me realize they need to receive more monetary funding – or better said – they need help to find out where the funds exist.

VOCENTO, a media company that does chef related events in Spain, is doing a number of important things to raise awareness- they added chapters on “Pastoreo y Ganaderia – talking about the different ways of milk farming, the importance and the issues.

*With them I participated in a conference highlighting how cheesemaking and milk farming helps to keep rural communities relevant and slow the depopulation from the countryside to the cities.*

Another way I am trying to make an impact is by encouraging cheese competitions to give awards to milk farmers and to create a category for cheese made from grassfed animals (or free grazing)

## **OBJECTIVES to Improve Milk Farmers Lives**

1. inform the public in respective countries about the opportunities
2. Run a campaign to change the image of the shepherd (instead of an older man, a young lad with a family, and modern)
3. create aids or help to set up agritourisms to be able to earn a better living
4. offer a way to connect with the final buyer to develop the sense of honor/pride
5. start some awards for shepherds to increase their self-esteem and bring them new challenges
6. create a system to economically reward animal welfare and other things

7. work on APPS (I have one) that would make the work more effective
8. create a symposium for cattlemen including other countries
9. Have a registry of shepherds/milk farmers and give them value by designating them as “Defenders of the Territory”

### **LAS FALLAS**

In March 2025 at the festival LAS FALLAS VALENCIA there will be a big structure depicting milk farmers as superheroes. The idea is if a few of the million visitors take away that we need to be thankful for the work of milk farmers, that they choose their profession. The *falla* is part of the #SalvaPastores project that seeks to deconstruct the incorrect popular belief of the shepherd and rancher, as well as reflect the importance of their figures in today's society.

I have a long road ahead however I am fueled by the wonderfully passionate people I meet on the way and the very many new friends I am making as I try to help create a path to be better for the future. The bottom line is that milk farmers are amazing – we need to thank them for doing what they do so we can be happier in our lives.