



*Jake of Dancing Dog Farm*

# the dogs of fromage

Dogs and cheesemakers share eons of history

BY SUE STURMAN

**a**bout 15,000 years ago, grey wolves started their transformation into *Canis lupus familiaris* — the dog — and humankind has never been the same.

Current scholarly thinking says the fierce wolf was able to evolve into the devoted dog because early humans unknowingly bred for tameness. Our ancient ancestors were, no doubt, food for roving wolf packs, but they also provided another kind of sustenance — their garbage. The wolves skulking around prehistoric refuse piles were likely to be low ranking; the high-ranking members of the pack got to eat their fill of any fresh kill. The lower down the social order, the less likely a full belly — and the more likely to search out a meal that didn't require a lot of sharing. Since these animals would be the least ferocious members of the pack, any that frequented the early garbage dumps would, by nature, be more inclined to domestication.

We'll never know exactly how the big bad wolf morphed into Fido, but we can be very thankful it happened. Early dogs hunted with their human pack members, guarded settlements, protected livestock, warned of intruders, fought off small predators, pulled cargo, carried burdens — in short, they worked for their keep. It took multiple millennia before the dog's main job was to provide love and affection.

The traits needed to do all that work have been inbred into our canine companions. That's why you can marvel when a Welsh Corgi tries to herd all the kids playing in the backyard or smile when a Great Pyrenees turns into a giant pillow for a toddler to nap on.

Among the most important jobs early dogs took on were herding and guarding. When humans stopped being hunter/gatherers and settled into agricultural societies, dogs made it possible for them to raise enough livestock to feed themselves and their families. A dog can control far more goats or sheep or cows than a person can. And even if a dog falls asleep while standing guard at night, its amazing hearing and smell alert it to impending danger. A pack of working dogs could have been the difference between adequate nutrition and starvation.

A good-sized herd or flock means the likelihood of lots of milk. And lots of milk means cheese. So now you can thank that little furball curled up on the couch for the delectable Cheddar or Chèvre or Manchego or Blue in the fridge.

Although today's farmers don't rely on dogs to the same degree as our forebears — at least in this country — many still look to dogs for help. Working dogs act as herders or guardians, and each has a distinct role. Dogs that work with livestock are divided into two groups — those that move stock (herding dogs) and those that protect stock (guarding dogs). Essentially, a herding dog relies on a hunter's instinct to gather up the prey before the kill. Breeding and training have modified this instinct so herders keep their charges collected and safe while retaining the ability to ward off threats of all kinds. Guardians live in constant close contact with their flock, keep them feeling secure, and defend them when necessary. In many rural areas, these dogs play an important role in fending off predators.



*Sammie of Robie Farm*



## Everona Dairy

Pat Elliot of Everona Dairy in Rapidan, Va., is a woman of many interests and many talents. She's a physician, a sheep rancher, a cheesemaker — and a lifelong lover of dogs. In college, she got involved in the sheep program at the University of Michigan, where she first observed and worked with sheep dogs. Some time later, after being inspired by a sheep dog demonstration, she bought a Border Collie puppy from one of the participants. These medium-sized working dogs are known for their energy and intelligence. They excel in agility, obedience and sheepdog trials — and at Frisbee. They need a lot of stimulation and exercise, and if they don't get it, they can turn that energy level into destructive behaviors.

After Pat got a sheep dog, she got sheep. Then came the epiphany: Milking the sheep might actually be a way for them to earn their keep! She had already taught herself to make cheese, so she began to experiment with her own sheep's milk, and it wasn't long before Everona Dairy began producing award-winning cheeses, including Piedmont, Stony Man and Shenandoah.

Pat's philosophy — "I don't buy anything I can make myself" — extends to her animals. So far, she has bred six generations of registered Border Collies, and she's developed a highly successful breeding program for her sheep. She recently added a second Polish Tatra Sheepdog to her menagerie. The Polish Tatra — also called the Polski Owczarek Podhalanski — is a rare breed in this country. A large, pure white herder/guardian developed in Poland, these are strong, hardy dogs that can withstand both harsh cold and hot, dry heat. Pat plans to begin yet another breeding program to expand this traditional companion/guard dog breed in the US.

*Pecorino of  
3-Corner Field Farm*



*16-year-old Pat Elliot of  
Everona Dairy & friend*

## Dancing Dog Farm

Sometimes dogs are so important to the cheesemaker that they become an inspiration. Such is the case with Dancing Dog Farm in Peterborough, N.H. Carol Lake chose that name as a tribute to her first working dog, Jake, who was half Farmcollie and half English Shepherd.

Farmcollies aren't a breed of dog — they're a type of dog, although most of them have Scottish Collie in their background. They're herders, hunters and guardians, who can move animals on their own when they see the need. They're protective of all members of the family and all livestock they know to be "theirs" and will defend them against any perceived threat. English Shepherds have been bred for generations as all-purpose, working farm dogs whose primary functions are working and tending livestock. Their other responsibilities have traditionally included killing vermin, guarding the home, and watching over children. With a heritage that combines all these traits, Jake must have been one incredible dog!

Carol teaches cheesemaking and for years ran Dancing Dog Farm as a non-profit educational program. Like Nana in *Peter Pan*, Jake helped her take care of her young family; he also chased hawks away from the hens, herded the pigs, and hunted vermin in the hay barn. In an example of the mystical inter-species communication that exists with working dogs, Jake knew instinctively that a free-range pig needed a much firmer approach than an easily upset lactating ewe. And that instinct extended to people as well. In his last few years, Jake worked as a therapy dog for Alzheimer's patients; he knew who needed a hug, who wanted to play, and who just wanted company.

"All I know is that they are good dogs — good friends, good

workers, good looking and first-rate helpers in every sense. I've had a Farmcollie or an English Shepherd by my side for over ten years now, and I wouldn't have it any other way," says Carol.

### 3-Corner Field Farm

Karen Weinberg at 3-Corner Field Farm in Shushan, N.Y., has three Maremma-Abruzzi sheepdogs named Roquefort, Pecorino, and Manchego. They live with the sheep — one with the ram lambs, one with the milkers, and one with the ewes — providing the calm and security essential to milking animals; upset animals provide far less milk than calm animals.

Italian shepherds have used Canes da pastore Maremmano-Abruzzese, as they call Maremmas, for centuries to guard sheep from wolves. Their white fur helps camouflage them within the herd and their large size and great strength offer protection from prey animals or human rustlers. They work well alone or in a pack.

Karen's Border Collie, Hemp, does the work of ten humans, patrolling the 20-acre fields covered with rolling hills and trees, rounding up sheep far more efficiently than humans could. And there is always that lovely bonus — the deep connection dogs provide. "One of the nicer parts of the job is to interact with these dogs," she says.

The sheep milk's cheeses made on

the farm include Ricotta, Brebis Blanche, Feta, Shushan Snow and Frère Fumant.

### Snowy Mountain Sheep Creamery

Stig and Sue Hansen are recent arrivals in the cheesemaking community. They started Snowy Mountain Sheep Creamery in Eden, Utah, three years ago, looking to escape the corporate world. All the milk from their 75 milkers — they have about 230 sheep total — goes into cheese. Their home is three miles from where the sheep are kept, so they bought two Great Pyrenees — Sasha and Kenai — who sleep during the day and are on patrol all night against marauders. In lambing season this is particularly important; predators such as mountain lions, coyotes, and foxes can smell placenta from miles away. Sasha and Kenai will lie on either side of a mother and a kid born in the night; they know instinctively that it's safe to walk away in the morning when the human caretakers arrive on the scene.

The Great Pyrenees has a long and fabled history as a guarder of sheep. It originated in Central Asia or Siberia, became an important mountain dweller in Europe and eventually became a favorite of 17th century French noblemen who used the dogs to protect their flocks from wolves and bears. In the modern era, this great white dog has proven itself to be a more than competent avalanche rescue dog,

cart-puller, sled dog, pack dog on ski trips, flock guardian, dog of war, and companion and defender of family and property. They're great with children, but they do tend to bark a lot and some tend to drool and slobber.

Coyotes, bald eagles, raccoons, wild pigs, hawks, elk, deer, opossums, snakes, osprey and bobcats can all be threats to milking stock. The biggest threat? Dogs, often neighborhood dogs allowed to roam free. The same instinct that makes a great herder — keeping the animals moving, keeping them together — operates in reverse in dogs not bred and trained to the work. The Hansens lost four sheep to local dogs that ran the sheep to death when Sasha and Kenai spent the night at the vet after being spayed. As loving and gentle as these working dogs can be, they're fierce defenders of their charges. They'll separate and isolate any perceived intruder — including humans they don't know — warn away marauders, and eventually kill anything foolhardy enough to ignore the warnings.

Sasha and Kenai must be doing their jobs well: The Hansens earned Best in Class in the US Cheese Making Championship in 2011 for their Timpanogoes Peak, a lightly blued bloomy-rind sheep-milk cheese.

### Pholia Farm

Gianaclis Caldwell of Pholia Farm in Rogue River, Ore., has goats that provide



*Sue Hansen and Kenai  
of Snowy Mountain Sheep Creamery*

the milk for her Takelma, Hillis Peak, Elk Mountain and Covered Bridge cheeses. As soon as she got the goats, she knew she would need a working dog and she chose a strong, brave breed — Anatolian Shepherds. She has two purebreds — Sophie and Eowyn — and an Anatolian/Great Pyrenees mix named Otis. Anatolians are flock guardians, not herding dogs, with superior sight and hearing. Loyal, alert and capable of great speed and endurance, they have an instinct to protect. This breed is patient and protective with children, but may accidentally knock them down. Anatolians that are going to work as flock guards shouldn't be family pets or they'll prefer to guard the family rather than the animals. They walk the border of their territory every night, then find a high place to lie and watch over their charges. Every few hours they get up and walk around their flock to make sure all is safe. If they detect danger, they give off a deep warning bark. If that doesn't scare away the threat, they deepen their bark making themselves sound more serious and alerting the flock to gather behind them. If the danger persists and approaches the flock, the Anatolian will attack, but this is always saved as a last resort.

In other words, Anatolians are brave, loyal, fierce and courageous. But they can also be cuddly and loving. Eowyn, a recently retired Anatolian, was recently granted her very own twin-size bed in the Caldwell's house.



*Otis of Pholia Farm*

Gianaclis selected her Anatolians for their mild temperaments and because they were completely socialized. They have, on occasion, done "an amazing job penning both people and dogs," she says. Her first dog was "re-homed." She believes guard dogs need to be paired; a lone dog can find it hard to defend against a large predator. And it's good practice to have a younger dog in training.

### **Bonnie Blue Farm**

Gayle Tanner has had goats for 38 years. She and her husband Jim have been making award-winning cheeses at Bonnie Blue Farm in Waynesboro, Tenn., since 2006. After being inspired by Jennifer Bice, the doyenne of the iconic Redwood Hill Farm, at a California State Fair, Gayle got her first goat as a 21st birthday present back in 1973. Belle, her first Great Pyrenees, lived out her life with the goats. The Tanners now have four of these gentle giants — Sugar, Mya, Alice and baby Lucy. The dogs take to their roles naturally; all Gayle has had to do is raise them around the goats and show them the daily farm routine. And they do a lot more than just watch the goats. Mya once intercepted a hawk that was after a hen and her newly hatched chicks. "A dog is an employee that works all the time," says Gayle. "I couldn't sleep at night without them."

She even named an ash-coated, bloomy-rind pyramid Great Pyrs; the name reflects both her admiration for the breed and the shape of the cheese. "They reminded me of our long-haired white Pyrenees that get a dust coating when there's dew on the grass and they roll in the dirt. They look filthy for a while but soon shed the dirt and like the P. candidum turning the gray ash to become white."

### **PastureLand Dairy Cooperative**

Benrud's Farm in Faribault, Minn., belongs to the



*Mya of Bonnie Blue Farm*

PastureLand Dairy Cooperative in Woodhue, Minn. Roger and Michelle Benrud had a Blue Heeler, aka Australian Cattle Dog, named Wylie. The breed originated in Australia in 1840 when George Elliott mixed native Dingoes with Collies and other herding dogs. Australian cattlemen and ranchers loved the breed's toughness and work ethic, and the dogs quickly became popular as cattle herders. They're high-energy, clever, active dogs that want time to exercise, play and work. Sometimes their herding instincts can be overpowering and they may "herd" family members or nip lightly at heels if they want something. Without daily physical exercise and mental stimulation, they can develop serious behavior problems.

According to Steve Young-Burns, ceo of PastureLand, "Wylie was a pretty good herding dog, but mostly excelled at chasing the cows out of the barn after milking. Most of our meetings were at that farm, and Wylie would always greet me when I got there, so she became my first friend at PastureLand. I learned to be careful of her enthusiastic greetings though — she once came to see me after she'd been wrestling with a skunk. In naming our raw-milk blue FarmDog, I wanted to honor the funky, humorous and hardworking presence that dogs bring to farms. They're always there, you love them because they're good pals, but sometimes they're a little stinky and you need to keep them at arm's length." Sadly, this buttery, creamy and very blue cheese is no longer in production. Pastureland is hoping for a new partnership that will enable them to revive FarmDog this spring.

## Robie Farm

Sometimes a cheesemaker's dog doesn't actually work with the milking animals. Betty Sue and Les Robie are sixth-generation owners of Robie Farm in Piermont, N.H., which has been a dairy operation since 1945. Their son Mark started making cheese half a dozen years ago, converting their horse barn into a shop and aging room. They're on their third dog. Their first, a silver blue merle Collie, herded the children like sheep, which didn't work out so well. Duke, an English Springer Spaniel, was the kids' dog for 14 years,

providing them with the kind of security and comfort that guard dogs provide sheep and goats. Their current dog, another English Springer Spaniel, is named Sammie.

English Springers were originally bred to be hunters; they're intelligent, skillful, willing and obedient. These even-tempered, gentle, friendly, sociable dogs are great with children. Affectionate, good natured and sincere, they love everyone.

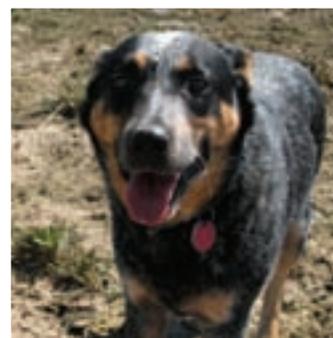
Sammie is a bird dog — of sorts. In addition to cows, the Robies also raise chickens, which are free range but which are definitely NOT welcome in Betty Sue's garden. According to her, Sammie, "brave working dog that he is," herds the chickens away from the garden.

The Robies make cheese from their own raw milk in small batches and age them on the farm. Their cheeses include Toma, Piemont, Swaledale and Manch-Vegas.

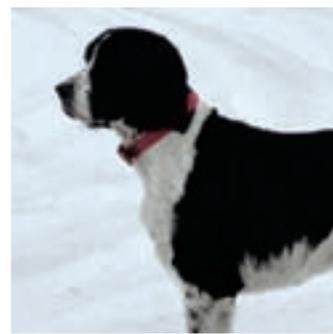
## Rogue Creamery

Not all cheesemakers have milking animals, but that doesn't mean they don't have working dogs. David Gremmels of Rogue Creamery, Central Point, Ore., can often be seen out hunting or hiking the Oregon hills with his German Shorthaired Pointers. These protective, clever, eager, willing-to-please hunting dogs are devoted to their human families. Happy-go-lucky, they love nothing more than activity with their owners such as a long walk, jog, hike, hunt, or game of Frisbee. When they lack exercise, they can become high strung and frustrated.

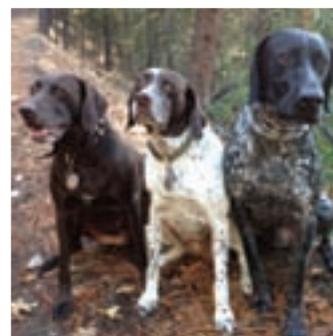
David is a third-generation breeder of these beautiful dogs. He and partner Cary Bryant apply the same depth of analysis and care to their breeding program that they do to Rogue's cheeses. The cheese connection doesn't stop there. David and the dogs hunt with Rex Infanger of Danisco USA, which produces some of Rogue Creamery's cultures. Tom Bradley, who was instrumental in bringing the duo to Rogue Creamery, has Cassie, one of David's favorite GSP progeny. Alex Shields, Rogue's first farmers market manager, also has a pup. "I take full responsibility for making GSP breeders big fans of American artisan cheese," says David.



*Wylie of Benrud's Farm*



*Sammie of Robie Farm*



*Olive, Penny & Galileo of Rogue Creamery*

And when it comes to American artisan cheese, he knows whereof he speaks: Rogue Creamery's Rogue River Blue has twice been chosen Best of Show by the American Cheese Society. Rogue's other award-winning cheeses include Smokey Blue, Oregonzola, Chocolate Stout Cheddar and Lavender TouVelle.

Of course, all these dogs have a keen — if not particularly discriminating — appreciation for cheese. They eat the curds, the imperfect cheeses and the leftover bits and pieces. In some cases, they'd eat nothing but cheese, given their druthers. **CC**