

FOOD

New kids on the block

A project to rear goats for milk and meat in urban areas is proving popular with city dwellers. By **Clare Hargreaves**

When you exit a large city you normally expect to see superstores, industrial units and other man-made urban sprawl on the side of roads and highways. But drive along Bristol's M32, and you may just spot a group of bearded goats browsing the wastelands around the city's landmark BT telecommunications tower. These goats are being reared for milk and meat by a group of Bristolians who believe that you can live in a city and be a farmer too.

On a Saturday evening, when others are drinking a pint in Bristol's pubs or dining in its many restaurants, members of the not-for-profit cooperative Streetgoat are milking their herds at four sites across the city – which between them cover around five acres of land – to help make food more affordable and encourage self-sufficiency.

At one site, Bridge Farm, an 18th-century stone building in the shadow of the motorway, I meet Carol Laslett, a former librarian and philosophy graduate who has been involved in Streetgoat almost since it started, seven years ago. Laslett and another member lead the farm's two milking goats, Betty and Lillian, down from their hay-cushioned shelter on the hill, through their acre of bramble-studded scrubland, and into a stone-flagged milking parlour.

"It can be tough setting out for milking in winter when it's rainy and dark," says Laslett, as she ushers milk into a stainless steel bucket. "But once your head is nuzzled against a goat's warm flank and you breathe in the sweet smell of hay, it can be magical. You forget everything else".

Members of Streetgoat come from all walks of life. Those at Bridge Farm include a postman, a train driver, a trainee psychotherapist, a Pilates teacher and a musician. For their milk, members pay an annual subscription of £70 and agree to milk the goats at least once a week – there are 30 households in total who belong to the scheme.

Yield varies according to the season. In spring, when the vegetation is growing fast, a goat will produce two to four litres a day, says Laslett. "In the winter it can drop to below a litre. Milkers fill their own containers to take home. Averaged across the year, the milk costs around £1 a litre, which compares well to what you'd pay in a supermarket."

Members either drink the milk, or turn it into creamy goat cheese (*inset*), delicious in salads, tarts and fritters. Regular milker Mary Dobbing has become famous locally for her baked Basque cheesecake, which often appears at Streetgoat social evenings.

But Streetgoat is not just about accessibility to affordable food. Members say they relish knowing where their food comes from and how it's been produced, and being partially self-sufficient in food.



Carol Laslett with Betty, below; Seah Hotson milks Lillian at Bridge Farm in Bristol

They also enjoy having the chance to farm and connect with animals, something usually reserved for people living in the countryside.

"Getting my milk here gives me choice and influence over where my food comes from," says Immy Young. "And it means I don't have to rely on supermarkets and global corporations." Members also report finding caring for goats helpful for physical and mental health. Train driver Gavin Turner found it therapeutic after being

traumatised by witnessing an attempted suicide on the train line. Others say goat-tending has been beneficial following bereavement.



Gavin Turner leading Betty into the milking parlour at Bridge Farm

Streetgoat provides not just milk, but meat too. Unwanted male goat kids are purchased in autumn from small goat dairy farms and reared on disused land until they are around 12 to 18 months old. They are then humanely slaughtered at a local abattoir.

"Wild-reared meat has a negligible carbon footprint, plus we're productively using land that would otherwise not be used, so the meat is very sustainable," says Laslett, introducing me to the goats on one of Streetgoat's five meat-goat grazing sites. With

its golden grasses swaying in the breeze, the spot feels gloriously rural, with only the distant roar of the motorway traffic and the sprawl of high-rise blocks below to remind me I'm in a city.

Laslett points to the top of the ridge. "Purdown is famous for its historic Second World War anti-aircraft batteries, but they had become overgrown, so Bristol City Council approached Streetgoat to ask if our goats could help clear the ivy and brambles.

"Luckily those are the goats' favourite foods! After they moved in, footfall increased as parents took their children to see them, so the goats had other benefits too."

Having the goats browse the land helps biodiversity, says Laslett. "By clearing brambles, the goats provide space for other plant species, which in turn supports wildlife like butterflies. At some of our sites we work closely with the local wildlife trust.

"Primary schools are also adopting goats and using them as teaching aids. One had a child who was struggling with language acquisition, and their first word was 'goat!'"

Any Bristol resident can buy the meat, not just members. When a goat is slaughtered, Laslett emails interested people on her mailing list and sells the meat at cost price – currently £10 to £14 a kilo – making

WELLBEING

After a bereavement and a divorce, walking saved me

Two major losses left **Johanna Basford** floundering – until she made the decision to tackle all of Scotland's Munros

I'm a big believer in the notion that "the universe only gives you what you can handle", so you can imagine my surprise when, just as I'd made it through the pandemic, lockdown and homeschooling my six- and three-year-old daughters, Evie and Mia, the universe chucked me a divorce (mine) and the death of my father at the same time.

The divorce came out of the blue, while my dad's passing was the final chapter in 10 years of living with cancer. The universe, it seems, had a lot of faith in my abilities. I was more sceptical.

Being busy is my safe place. Stuff to do, lists to be ticked off. When dad was having chemotherapy and I was home with the kids all day, there was a lot of stuff to be done, and it kept me busy, distracted. Fast forward a few months and life suddenly got much quieter.

Every second Saturday I would have the entire day to myself. The kids were with their dad and, for the first time in seven years, I wasn't making boiled eggs, searching for ballet shoes and fishing soggy towels out of the swimming pool changing rooms. To be honest, I was a little lost. I didn't know what to do with that time.

I'm an illustrator and I spend my work days creating and drawing. To do this, I need to have a fairly wild imagination. This is great when it comes to thinking up ideas for my books – but the downside is that it goes the other way too.

My mind can take me to dark places. I can dream up a castle perched on top of a rainbow surrounded by stars, but I can also picture a dark pit of despair with ravenous monsters lurking in the depths. You can't have the good without the bad.

Too much free time meant too many opportunities for me to fall into the darker side of my imagination. My friends would agree that I can be a bit of a catastrophiser and I'm prone to the odd doom spiral. I felt myself getting swept down that route on those lonely Saturdays and knew I needed a plan. I just wasn't sure what.

Then a friend, who had also lost her dad, suggested we go for a walk. A big walk. Up a Munro. A Munro is a mountain in Scotland measuring more than 3,000ft and there are 282 of them.

For that first walk, I dug out the hiking boots I bought when I was 16, shoved a sandwich and a Disney princess water bottle into a backpack and we headed off.

In hindsight, we were woefully underprepared, but thankfully it was summer and Mount Keen isn't a challenging walk. But those six hours in the fresh air with my friend were incredible.

We all know outdoor exercise is a



Illustrator Johanna Basford dusted off her old hiking boots and found comfort

fantastic mood-booster, so it makes sense that climbing a mountain under a vast sky, with fresh air barrelling into your lungs, would bring you peace.

I got home from that first walk sunburnt and knackered, but massively at peace. Not jumping about in delight like I'd won the lottery, but with a deep, quiet sense of contentment and delight in life that I hadn't had for a while. Even seeing little empty beds didn't pull at my heartstrings in the same way. I still missed the children, but I accepted it a little more easily. I knew they'd be back tomorrow. (I also knew I needed a bath, a large bowl of pasta and some aftersun.)

I'm not sure what it is exactly that I like about being up the hills. Maybe it's the ability to have a really long conversation with a good friend, or the guilt-free snacking, the awe-inspiring views on a bluebird day or the simple fact that you can't doom-scroll on social media as you scramble up a rocky path.

There's also the people. I firmly believe you only meet good souls on the hills – I've yet to meet a bad egg. Folk are friendly, happy, each delighted with their day and hoping for that perfect view from the top. There's no competition – people stop for chats, offer tips about the best route up a tricky scramble, share sweets and commiserate about the midgets.

My favourite thing is the walkers on the way down, who shout encouragement as they pass to those of us still to reach the summit.

In hindsight, I'm grateful the universe sent me that shambles of a year, because if it hadn't, those hiking boots might still be buried at the back of the cupboard. Instead, I've rediscovered a part of me that brings me so much joy and contentment in life.

It's a funny type of camaraderie that I think is rare these days, but which warms my heart.

There's also something immensely humbling about being on the top of a mountain, looking out at the spectacular landscape (if you are lucky and get clear skies) and realising how small and insignificant we each are. And by default, how small and insignificant our worries are. It's a great way to zoom out and put a little perspective on things.

I've now bagged 24 of the 282 Munros. Yes, I'm going for them all. As the tally has increased, so too has my kit. I'm now the proud owner of an actual rucksack, a compass and many maps.

Each walk is so unique – it's not just the route, but the company, the weather, the sandwiches and the conversation. On that first walk up Mount Keen I spoke about my dad, his passing and the weirdness of grief. The Ben Lawers 7 had me laughing at dating stories till I almost fell over.

The Ring of Steall was an all-action day with the best group of girls, and The In Pinn, the infamous rock perched on top of Sgurr Dearg on the Isle of Skye, well, that was just plain terrifying. But I was glad I did it – and glad to be alive afterwards.

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'Rooms of Wonder' by Johanna Basford (Ebury, £14.99) is published on 6 October



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