



## Viva la Spanish Goat

**Help preserve a piece of history by raising Spanish goats—a hardy meat goat of older origins.**

By Sue Weaver

© Gurney Davis In this article ... The Brush Goat Era

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When Christopher Columbus' fleet of 17 ships sailed from Cadiz on Sept. 25, 1493, it carried 1,200 settlers and everything needed to colonize the New World Columbus had discovered on his first voyage, including dogs, cats, chickens, horses, donkeys, cattle, pigs, sheep and goats.

When the fleet reached Hispaniola (the island that now comprises Haiti and the Dominican Republic), the goats that Columbus' crew unloaded became the first to set foot on the New World's soil—but they certainly weren't the last.

Goats played a primary role in Spanish exploration and colonization.

Spanish sailors salted islands along nautical routes with pigs and goats, knowing they'd survive and multiply, the better to provide fresh meat on subsequent trips; goats accompanied land route explorers as a walking meat supply, escaping, at times, to establish feral populations.

And Spanish colonists loved the hardy goat. While other species such as cattle and sheep required grass to survive, the tough, adaptable goats grazed brush, scrub and brambles—and they thrived.

In 1539, Don Francisco Vázquez de Coronado marched north out of Mexico with 83 wooden-wheeled wagons, 336 soldiers and settlers, five Franciscan padres, 552 horses, 600 mules, and 5,000 sheep and goats to settle Nuevo México.

© Jeannette Beranger/ALBC Fifty-six years later, Don Juan de Oñate rode north with more soldiers, settlers and livestock, including 2,517 churra sheep and 846 goats.

Then in 1691, Don Domingo Teran de los Rios led an exploratory expedition to East Texas, bringing with his party some 1,700 sheep and goats; he was followed in the spring of 1721 by a colonizing party led by the Marqués de San Miguel de Aguayo, who recruited 500 settlers and collected 2,800 horses, 4,800 head of cattle, and 6,400 sheep and goats to settle East Texas.

During the mid-1700s, the Franciscan Order of the Catholic Church established missions in Texas, as well as a series of 21 missions stretching north and south along the coastline of California.

Each mission maintained a herd of goats.

Teasel and Me

While researching "The Challenges of Raising Rare Breeds" (Hobby Farms, May/June 2007), I enjoyed a long telephone conversation with Don Schrider, communication director for the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy.

We spoke of Marsh Tacky horses, endangered hogs ("Southern Heritage Hogs" Hobby Farms, July/August 2008) and, finally, Spanish goats.



“Breeding to Boer goats has almost wiped out the pure Spanish goat,” he said.

That made me stop and think. When we moved to the southern Ozarks in 2002, we saw herds of Spanish goats wherever we went.

We still see some Spanish does, but now they’re pastured with Boer bucks. As they die or are culled for age, they’re replaced with their part-Boer daughters.

When we moved here, one of the highlights of going to town was passing an Ozark hill farm where a magnificent Spanish buck with huge, twisty horns led a herd of handsome Spanish does.

Soon after our arrival, a Boer took the big buck’s place. Still, I had my eye on a favorite, long-horned, cream-colored doe and over the years I’ve picked her out whenever we drove by.

In June 2007, we stopped to chat with the Ozark farmer who owns the goats, as we often do.

As usual, I comment on my favorite doe. Her owner says, “I’m taking her to the sale next week.”

Of course I bought her and now I have my own Spanish goat.

I named her Teasel because she’s as tough and as beautiful as a teasel flower, and, unfortunately, every bit as wild.

I love goats. I have goats of several breeds, including Boers, and Boer goats are my passion. However, my girls are expensive pasture ornaments instead of breeding stock because we can’t bear to lose any more of them during kidding.

Rangy, rugged Teasel has lived among Boer royalty for exactly one year, consuming the same feed and sharing their housing.

Based on fecal testing, she has yet to be dewormed and we’ve never had to trim her hooves.

When the Boers and my Nubian dairy queens hunker down under a tree in the yard and wait to be fed, Teasel marches past them out to the pasture to munch brush and, sighing, the others get up and follow.

When something unusual happens, Teasel is the sentry who issues a warning call.

The difference is like night and day. Teasel is a rugged, resourceful, go-getter and my beloved Boers are caprine cream puffs.

Which would I choose if I were still raising goats? Spanish—in a heartbeat!

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In 1832, the California missions collectively owned 1,711 goats, but it was in the harsh, arid Southwest that Spanish goats truly thrived. By 1767, Father Gaspar José de Solis reported 17,000 head of sheep and goats at the San Antonio missions alone.

Meanwhile, Spain dispatched explorers and colonists to Spanish Florida, and with those parties went stalwart Spanish goats.

Spanish Florida included parts of modern-day Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi, an area and climate alien to goats from arid Spain, but they adapted—quickly—to the hot, steamy American Southeast.

Until the Mayflower landed at Cape Cod in November of 1662, the only goats in all of North America were Spanish goats.

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The Brush Goat Era

Ranchers in the Southwest call them Spanish goats, but in the Southeast they’ve gone by many different names: wood



goats in Florida, briar goats in the Carolinas, hill goats in Virginia and scrub or brush goats everywhere throughout the South.

As time passed and even after other types came on the scene, Spanish goats remained the goat of choice in these regions. Always tough, hardy and infinitely adaptable, they didn't demand the pampering and supplemental feeding European goats needed. They were kings at what they did best: clear brush.

Spanish goats flourished from the Pineywoods of Florida through the rugged Appalachians and west across the Upper South to Texas and beyond, and they didn't need man's help to do it. Ranches in the Southwest covered thousands of acres that, untended, ran to cactus and brush. To keep it open and productive for cattle and sheep, brush control was (and is) an ongoing process—and that's where Spanish goats shine.

While most Spanish goats were kept for brush control, their hides were used for leather and their meat made fine eating, too. Cabrito, kid-goat barbeque, is still a favorite, festive meal in the Southwest and most ranchers who kept goats also ate them.

Angora goats took Texas by storm in the late 1800s. Ranchers who were already involved in raising sheep found fiber goats even easier to raise. A lot of Spanish goats lost their jobs to Angoras, but only for a while, until ranchers discovered Spanish goats were better brush grubbers than their woolly kin, whose locks liked to tangle (and get ruined) in the scrub.

The Golden Age of the Angora lasted until 1993, when Congress passed a bill implementing a three-year phase-out of the Wool Act of 1954, a program that helped subsidize the fiber industry.

Over the next few years, large-scale breeders phased out thousands of fiber goats and began casting around for something to take their place.

At the same time, United States demographics were changing and a new group of goat-eaters emerged. Middle Eastern immigrants, Asians, North Africans and Latinos from around the globe were all used to eating goat meat, especially on religious holidays and special occasions.

To supply their needs, in 1989 alone, the United States imported 1,200 metric tons of frozen or chilled goat meat valued at \$1.7 million. Why not supply that demand here at home?

Brush goats became meat goats overnight. Some ranchers already selected for muscle and meatiness within the Spanish goat population, so Spanish meat goats filled an existing market.

In the Southwest, where they'd always been the goat of choice, ranchers began raising them on a grander scale: Herds of thousands graced many a Texas ranch.

Spanish goats were the only meat goats in America, save meaty-type Myotonics (fainting goats) in a few parts of the United States, until 1993, when the first North American-born Boer goats were released from quarantine in Canada and sold to breeders throughout Canada and the United States.

Right from the start, Boers were big—very big. Soon, breeders and ranchers mortgaged the farm to pay astronomical prices for the red-headed, white-meat goats from South Africa.

Many bought a Boer buck (or a partbred Boer buck if a purebred wasn't in their budget) and took him home to "upgrade" their Spanish herds. Boer-Spanish kids were meatier than their mothers and hardier than their South African dads; soon red-headed kids brought a premium at every sale barn.

Meat-goat ranchers bred first generation and second generation does back to Boer bucks—and then something odd started happening.

As the percentage of Boer in each generation increased, offspring lost the hardiness that enabled ranchers to raise Spanish goats with minimal intervention.

Parasite resistance was all but lost, does began experiencing kidding problems and trimming hooves became a routine chore.

So, many large-scale goat ranchers went back to crossing low-maintenance Spanish does with Boer bucks to create



fast-gaining, first-generation hybrid meat goat kids for the terminal market.

Predictably, as Spanish billies were replaced with Boer bucks, fewer Spanish kids were born. In 1990, there were 280,000 of these goats in Texas alone; in 2007, when the Spanish Goat Association was formed, only an estimated 5,000 to 6,000 remained in the entire United States.

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What Is a Spanish Goat?

#### Expert Advice

We asked Spanish Goat Association founder Justin Pitts, of Ellisville, Miss., what advice he would give prospective conservators.

“Start with purebred goats and buy as many as you can,” he says. “Try to breed within established bloodlines, but if that’s not possible, it’s OK to cross bloodlines within pure Spanish lines. Contact the registry for a breeders’ list; we can steer you to the kind of goats you need and we’re also here to give advice.”

If you love goats and you’re looking for a conservation program that needs your helping hand, this is a good one.

Visit the Spanish Goat Association’s information-packed website for an in-depth look at the breed and at the old-line ranchers and farmers that kept it alive.

The Spanish Goat Association  
[www.spanishgoats.org](http://www.spanishgoats.org)

For more information, call Leslie Edmundson 540-687-8871 or e-mail [postmaster@spanishgoats.org](mailto:postmaster@spanishgoats.org)

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In some parts of the United States, the term “Spanish goat” is used to describe any rangy goat of mongrel breeding. However, “purebred Spanish goat” is not an oxymoron.

A handful of ranchers and breeders in Texas and the Southeast maintained closed herds for decades; these are today’s true Spanish goats. Others in those regions outcrossed to other breeds to some degree, but the goats they produced are of interest to Spanish goat breeders, too; the old blood runs in their veins, so they’re prime candidates for upgrading programs.

The purebred Spanish goat is a very old landrace breed shaped by natural selection and geographic isolation, so Spanish goats vary from one region (and even one ranch) to another.

However, the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy, in conjunction with the Spanish Goat Association, established the following guidelines: Head Profile is usually straight or slightly convex. The ears are moderately long and usually fall horizontally, but close to the head, and alongside the face rather than out to the side. Long ears out to the side are more typical of a Nubian cross, which is a common cross with these goats. Horns Usually long, on bucks they tend to flare up, out laterally and twist at the tips. The large size and lateral twist are very typical. Body Spanish goats are usually somewhat rangy and large-framed, rather than compact and cobby. In select lines, the rangy frame is well-filled so that meat conformation is good. Feet and legs The feet are usually sturdy with upright, strong pasterns. Legs are generally straight from front and rear view, with some tendency to be “cow hocked” (a conformational defect where the points of the hock are close together and the fetlocks are wider apart than normal). Hair Coat Usually short; some have longer hair, especially on the lower body and thighs. Some lines produce heavy, cashmere coats. Color All colors are acceptable. Some colors that occur in pure examples can resemble the colors in other breeds, but are no indication of crossbreeding unless accompanied by other conformational evidence.

#### Evidence of Crossbreeding

This varies with the type of goat introduced: Nubian cross: Large, horizontal or drooped ears that fall straight out to the



side of the head. Thick, heavy, but short, horns. Boer cross: Similar to Nubian. Angora cross: Ears similar to Nubian crosses, with excess hair. Alpine or other Swiss dairy crosses: Shorter ears, usually upright rather than horizontal. Heavy, long horns with less twist than pure Spanish goats.

What Spanish goats of all shapes and sizes have in common is the rawhide-tough ability to survive.

Kept on the rocky soil of the Southwestern states, Spanish goats' hooves rarely (if ever) need trimming. They're parasite resistant, even on today's small farm. Does kid twins and triplets with ease, and raise their young without assistance. This breed survived for centuries with very little help from humankind, making it America's best choice for minimal-intervention goat production programs.

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#### Spanish Goats Can Do

Spanish goats are productive.

Between September 2003 and August 2005, researchers at Tennessee State University exposed 66 Boer, 51 Kiko<sup>1</sup>, and 51 Spanish does (all were 94- to 100-percent pureblood) to bucks of their own breed in a study designed to assess doe reproductive performance on southeastern United States pastures.

The does were managed together under semi-intensive conditions and kids were weaned at three months.

Only 82 percent of the Boer does delivered at least one live kid, while 96 percent of the Kikos and 92 percent of the Spanish does produced at least one living kid. Litter sizes (1.9 kids each) and litter weight (6.03 kg) were the same across the board for all three breeds. However, only 72 percent of the Boer does weaned at least one kid (with a litter size at weaning of 1.55 kids), while 93 percent of the Kikos and 88 percent of Spanish does weaned at least one kid, with litter size at weaning of 1.69 for Kiko and 1.79 for Spanish does.

But that's not all: More than one-fifth of the Boer does (21.5 percent) died or were culled for infertility or chronic health problems; Kikos enjoyed a survival rate of 99.1 percent and 93.9 percent of the Spanish does survived.

All of the does were dewormed twice a year, but based on fecal testing, 54 percent of the Boer does required additional deworming (their samples averaged parasite egg counts of 521.7 eggs per gram) compared to 10 percent of the Kikos (at 298.1 eggs per gram) and 17 percent of the Spanish does (only 181.3 eggs per gram).

Almost all of the Boer does were treated for hoof scald or hoof rot twice, compared to 58 percent of Kiko and 79 percent of Spanish does treated once.

The figures don't lie: Kiko and Spanish does are considerably more parasite resistant, less prone to lameness and more likely to raise kids to weaning age.

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#### Saving the Spanish Goat

Recently, the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy, concerned about the dwindling number of purebred Spanish goats, placed the breed on its Conservation Priority List and encouraged a contingent of long-time breeders to form a breed association and registry for Spanish goats.

Formed in August of 2007, the current mission of the Spanish Goat Association is to locate America's remaining purebred Spanish goats and to encourage the conservation breeding of America's own meat goat breed.

So far, the organization has located and documented about 5,000 purebred goats and 12 bloodlines within the Spanish goat population. A registry is still evolving as members determine what type of herd book will best serve the breed.

At this writing, 16 farms and ranches and two universities are listed on the Spanish Goat Association's breeders' list: 11 in Texas, two in Tennessee and one each in Mississippi, North Carolina, Wisconsin, Montana and California. Additional conservators are needed. Contact Leslie Edmundson 540-687-8871 or e-mail [postmaster@spanishgoats.org](mailto:postmaster@spanishgoats.org) for more information.

<sup>1</sup> Kiko goats were developed by the Goatex Group LLC of New Zealand. Beginning in 1978, with feral goats much like



America's Spanish goat, developers maintained their seed stock in a stark, low-intervention manner and culled less-productive traits over a four-generation period before marketing the results as Kiko goats. The Kiko is a hardy, productive meat goat with many traits in common with purebred Spanish goats. They are not, however, a heritage breed.

About the Author: Sue Weaver is an HF contributing editor who raises, among many other species, goats; she loves her Spanish goat, Teasel.

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