



UC Small Farm Center Added Value Case Study

Cashmere Company Breeds Success



Above: Talibah Al-Rafiq holds yarn spun from the fiber of her cashmere producing goats. Below: California Cashmere Gift Boxes — Spinners Gift Box, Knitters Gift Box, and Combo Gift Box — are displayed in the Al-Rafiqs' hilltop office.



When Al-Rafiq and Ajamu Al-Rafiq discovered the niche that would help build their California Cashmere Company into a financial success, they had to travel all the way to China to make their dream come true.

“We started back in 1990 with a small herd of cashmere producing goats,” says Al-Rafiq Al-Rafiq. “And at that time, our goal was just to produce goats and shear the fleece, and send it off and get rich,” she says, laughing. Launching their business with 31 goats in Calaveras County’s rolling foothill country, the couple realized after their first harvest that they would never succeed that way. “As with any farming operation, the farmer doesn’t make that much off the raw product,” says Al-Rafiq.

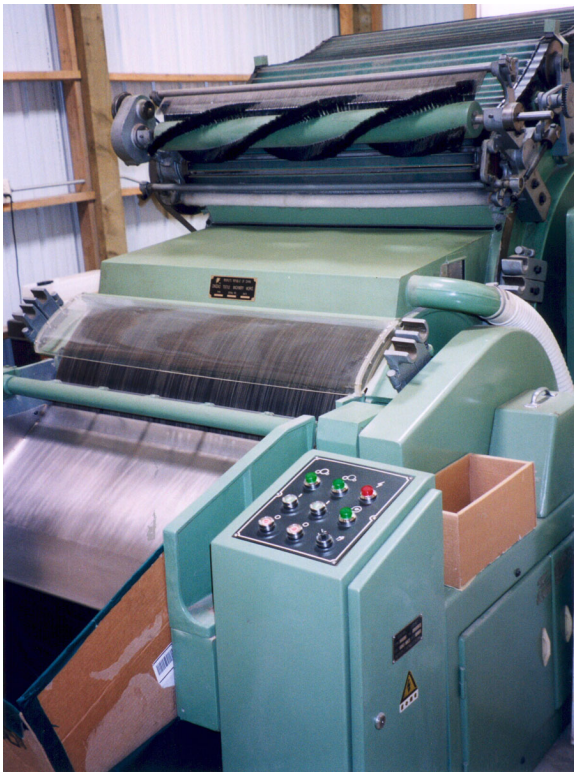
Undaunted, the couple began to research other options. Their research trail led them to the discovery that the only company processing high end wools (cashmere, llama, etc.) in the U.S. was on the east coast and had a processing limit of 500 pounds. That left many small-scale, high-end wool ranchers with no place to process lower fiber weights. Now the Al-Rafiqs had found their niche. But they needed to find a dehairing machine to process the fiber and make it viable as an added value product.

The Hunt

The Al-Rafiqs also discovered that China is the world’s largest cashmere producer, and therefore the obvious choice for locating a dehairing machine. Through sponsorship by Thian Hor Teh, a professor at Oklahoma’s Langston University, the Al-Rafiqs made two trips to China and Inner Mongolia in 1994 and 1996 to visit goat farms, research machines, and train on fiber identification. When they settled on a machine, the couple negotiated into the purchase price the services of a training engineer and a translator to accompany the machine’s delivery. When the machine arrived at their hilltop home in 1996, it was accompanied not only by a translator, but also the engineer who actually built the machine. He and the translator stayed for two months to train the couple. “We were just so elated about it all,” says Al-Rafiq.

Family Background

Although the Al-Rafiqs hail from farming and ranching families, they themselves led different professional lives prior to launching Al-Rafiq Farms and California Cashmere Company. Al-Rafiq’s husband, Ajamu, comes from Alabama, where his family farmed vegetables and raised horses, and Al-Rafiq is from Mississippi where her family had a horse ranch. As adults, Ajamu became a computer specialist and Al-Rafiq was involved in the insurance industry. In 1986, the couple moved from the Bay Area to Calaveras County and decided they wanted to get into farming. On the drive into work one day, Ajamu, who still works as a computer specialist, heard a radio program about cashmere pro-



Above: The dehairing machine moves the raw fiber through the its paces, culling rough and short hair for other added value markets. Below: A California Cashmere Company buck.

or knitter by offering three specialty cashmere gift boxes. The Spinners Gift Box contains 8 ounces of pure cashmere fiber and a wooden spindle; the Knitters Gift Box holds 8 ounces of cashmere yarn and a knitting needle; and the Combo Gift Box contains both 8 ounces of cashmere fiber and 8 ounces of cashmere yarn. Prices range from \$139 for the Knitters Gift Box to \$295 for the Combo Gift Box.

Other Added Value Ventures

Agritourism began three years ago when the Al-Rafiqs started offering ranch visits by appointment only. Guests view the large herd, now up to 400 goats, that the couple move between their two properties: a 10-acre site, called the West End, which houses their dehairing machine and other equipment, and two goat paddocks; and the 270 acre site, called the East End, where the company office is located, and where 150 bucks are now grazing and cleaning brush. In the future, the couple plans to design paddocks with tourism in mind so visitors can walk next to the animals.

Another added value outlet is the fiber classes they offer at their hilltop office, in which spinners learn how to identify yield and judge fiber; and breeders learn about cashmere producing goats and their maintenance, including worming, kidding, and harvesting.



Maintenance and Sheering

Goat maintenance occurs twice a year at Al-Rafiq Farms, and one person is required to assist the couple with that process. First, the goats are herded four or five at a time into the Down Under, a miracle machine the Al-Rafiqs discovered on a trip to Australia. The machine gently holds the goats in place while they are examined, and then gradually raises them up in the air, where they rest while their hooves are clipped. "They like to be up high, so it works out for them." says Al-Rafiq. The goats are then lowered and moved one at a time onto the sheering stand, where Ajamu Al-Rafiq sheers them standing up.

Sheering occurs at Al-Rafiq Farms/California Cashmere Company once a year, from January to March. The Al-Rafiqs employ four helpers to assist them with that process. Cashmere down growth begins on about the longest day of the year and stops on about the shortest day. Shortly after down growth stops, it will be shed naturally if not combed or sheered. Sheering on other ranches across the country occurs between January and May, and during

ducing goats from Australia. He and his wife researched the idea and decided to take the plunge.

"Adding value to any product is really necessary," says Al-Rafiq Al-Rafiq. As for cashmere, she says, "If you don't have it dehaired, it can't be a viable product." Fiber that has not been dehaired sells for about \$35 a pound, versus \$18-\$22 an ounce for dehaired product. Once the dehaired fiber is spun into yarn, it is worth \$22-\$25 an ounce.

Dehairing Process

After the Al-Rafiqs shear the goats, they may run as little as one ounce of fiber through the dehairing machine, a Model FB 200. The machine separates the two different hair types: the course outer guard hair and the softer inner down, or cashmere. The course hair fibers that are culled out are used for natural hair brushes and carpet backing. "There isn't a waste in this business at all," says Al-Rafiq. While on vacation in Barbados, she and her husband met a couple from England who have a hair brush business, and through this interaction, the Al-Rafiqs established another added-value outlet for their business.

The Al-Rafiqs not only dehair and scour or clean their own fiber, but they also process fiber, broker fiber, and provide fleece analysis. In addition, they send dehaired fiber to outside sources, where it is spun into yarn and returned to them for sale. The cashmere comes from the goats in natural colors of white, gray, and brown, and because gray cashmere is in high demand, the couple is now beginning to breed for that color.

They've also tapped into the market of the individual spinner



The California Cashmere Company office displays include a cloud of dehaired white cashmere and a cashmere scarf as well as the company's spun yarn packs, fiber packs, and gift boxes.

this time, the dehairing orders start coming in to Al-Rafiq Farms. From May to August, they run the dehairing machine nonstop.

Feed

The couple raise the goats strictly for fiber. Although people have tried to raise goats for fiber, milk and meat, Al-Rafiq says it can't be done successfully due to different dietary needs for each enterprise. While cashmere producing goats do not need a high protein diet, meat and milk producing goats have different requirements. The Al-Rafiqs feed their goats all varieties of grass hays, and while they purchase all their feed supply at this time, they will begin producing their own feed by next spring.

Health, Sickness, Mortality, and Predators

California Cashmere Company goats are culled after seven years, or when their fiber starts to look coarse. The fiber must be within 16 and 17 1/2 microns for quality production. After culling, the goats can still be used for breeding if they are healthy, and the Al-Rafiq's goats are a healthy bunch, with sickness a rarity in the herd. They still have 10 does and one buck remaining from the original 1990 herd purchase.

As for the lower number of bucks surviving from the original herd, Al-Rafiq speculates that bucks live a shorter life due to their stressful and repeated aggression against each other during rutting season from late August through December. "They bang against each other asserting their dominance," she says. But mortality rates due to sickness are practically non-existent. During the years, the couple have lost only one goat to a breech birth.

But predators are another story. Bears, coyotes, wild dogs, and mountain lions all exist as potential threats. At this point, the Al-Rafiqs have suffered minimal losses, with one goat lost to a bear and none lost to wild dogs or coyotes. Mountain lions generally take one goat per year, but in one frightening time period around 1997 or 1998, the couple lost 12 goats when a female mountain lion was training her four offspring to hunt. The five predators were captured and put to sleep, and the situation was considered an anomaly. To slow further losses, the couple use a ranch dog to warn if a problem exists, but they've also employed another unusual protector: a llama. The llama patrols the fence line and protects her goats with fierce kicks and threatening noises.

Marketing

With such a unique operation, the Al-Rafiqs market their many added value services through a variety of outlets. Regularly attending knitting and weaving related shows and conferences, they also market via e-mail and direct mail. They use mailing lists obtained at conferences to send out surveys, and respond to survey results with sample kits or additional information. They also advertise their operation via the Small Farm Center agritourism database at www.calagtour.org and in the Calaveras Grown farm trail map. Always on the lookout for new opportunities, the Al-Rafiqs are thinking about venturing out to other types of conferences, including gift and gourmet shows.

While they did have to go all the way to China, not once, but twice, to make their venture successful, the Al-Rafiqs' efforts paid off in a big way. The only other dehairing enterprise in the United States has closed up shop and moved to China.

"We're the only custom dehairing operation in the United States," says Al-Rafiq. Now they're flooded with dehairing orders from January to May, when shearing occurs on other ranches across the country. From May to August, the dehairing machine runs nonstop. "Yes, it's great," says Al-Rafiq about the success of their business. But like many other added-value farming entrepreneurs, she says, "Everything we've done, we've had to learn it along the way." ■

Author and photographer: Susan McCue for the UC Small Farm Center.