



New Owner Of Belle Chèvre Updates Branding To Eliminate 'Snob Appeal' & Promote Democratization Of Cheeses

Pioneer southern goat cheese company Fromagerie Belle Chèvre is under new ownership, with products turned out in new packaging designed to draw mass appeal and eliminate the perceived exclusivity of artisan goat cheese.

New owner and company president Tasia Malakasis bought Fromagerie Belle Chèvre of Elkmont, AL, from longtime owners Liz and Tom Parnell in January 2007.

"I had been courting Liz for a number of years," Malakasis said.

With a "drastically different" background in Internet marketing technology, Malakasis took her passion for food and enrolled in New York's Culinary Institute of America in 2001.

While in Manhattan, Malakasis stopped at gourmet grocer Dean & DeLuca and discovered Alabama-based Belle Chèvre cheese – Alabama being where Malakasis grew up.

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—Tasia Malakasis

"At that point, I started doing some research," Malakasis said. "What an amazing company; what an amazing product. And how could I not know about it, coming from Alabama?"

Malakasis contacted Liz Parnell a short time later about a possible business venture.

"It took her awhile to pay attention to me," Malakasis said. "I think she thought I was a bit crazy."

It wasn't until 2006 while working in Philadelphia that Malakasis called Parnell again and said "Liz, I just quit my job and I'm coming home to make cheese."

For the next six months, Malakasis interned gratis at Belle Chèvre. In January 2007, the Parnells sold the company through an "earn out," in which Liz will continue to serve as a consultant for the next four years.

New Products Hit Market Using

Original Recipe; Production Doubles
All company recipes will remain intact, Malakasis insisted. However, in the year and a half since she took over, Belle Chèvre has released roughly 10 new products.

"We're just playing with the cheese a bit more," Malakasis said.

"We're not changing the core of the recipe."

Five varieties of Belle Chèvre are currently available, including traditional Montrachet-style logs – a Tuscan chevre marinated in olive oil and sun-dried tomatoes; medallions, crumbles and spreadable Fromage Blanc.

Belle Chèvre Montrachet logs may also be accented with unusual herbs like Korean Red Pepper, Ash, Sumac, Marjoram and Herbs de Provence.

New items include truffles made with goat cheese, goat cheese straws and other products designed to complement cheese trays.

Nor is the company altering its milk supply. The model for Belle Chèvre since its inception has been to buy milk from local dairies.

Production has increased dramatically under the new ownership, according to Malakasis. The staff has also doubled in size.

"Liz did a fabulous job of developing a great recipe, winning awards and getting the cheese into cache cheese shops across the country," she said.

As an Alabamian who had to travel to New York to find this cheese, one of the things I would like to do is make it more accessible, Malakasis said.

To that end, the company is increasing distribution and made the decision to re-brand.

New Branding Designed To

Eliminate 'Snob Appeal'

People tend to be intimidated by cheese – particularly goat cheese, according to Malakasis. What she wanted to accomplish with rebranding was to make products more user-friendly.

Previous branding for Belle Chèvre was elegant and classy, with Tiffany blue hues; the new look and the tone of the campaign is "fun and approachable," Malakasis said.

"The snob appeal is gone," she said. "People are incorporating what used to be 'specialty foods' into their everyday lives, and are having more fun with the experience."

The brand is fun, flirty and capricious, and that's really my attitude about cheese, Malakasis said. It's serious food, but I also want people to be able to have fun with it.

"It's not my marketing strategy to be exclusive or keep the cheese from people. We're trying to start a revolution about food and changing the way in which we engage with our food sources, but we can't do that unless we make good, fresh food available to people," Malakasis said.

Some manufacturers want to make their cheese hard to attain, and that in some way lends to its status and value. But that's in opposition to my philosophy, Malakasis continued.

Previously, Fromagerie Belle Chèvre sold products nationally to high-end cheese shops like the Cheese Store of Beverly Hills, as well as upscale retail chains like Whole Foods Market.

Ironically, no one in Elkmont, AL, knew about the company.

Now the cheese is available at both small and large retailer stores throughout the South, and is sold at Target locations nationwide.

"I'm particularly proud of the fact that we are now in three Piggly Wiggly stores in the area," Malakasis said.

Through our "democratization of goat cheese," Piggly Wiggly is out-selling Whole Foods, she continued.

Consumer Interest In Food Sources

Will Counteract Poor Economy

America's current flagging economy isn't expected to affect sales at Belle Chèvre dramatically – if at all, according to Malakasis.

What will counter market fluctuations will be increased consumer awareness of food sources, she said.

"Consumers are more educated about how and where food products are made," Malakasis said.

"They are willing to seek and pay a premium for organic, 'slow food' and artisan products because they know how much better tasting and healthier they are than mass-produced," she said.

High-end goat cheese is enjoying an unprecedented popularity, and not just with gourmards, Malakasis continued.

"I liken the cheese industry today to what the American wine industry was 15 years ago. What used to be hard-to-find and intimidating is now readily available in many varieties and flavors, with limitless serving and cooking opportunities," she said.

"Our cheese has been served at the White House as well as an accompaniment to crackers at

Super Bowl parties," Malakasis continued.

My whole goal with this is to play with our food and make life enjoyable with it, Malakasis said.

Ideally, in the next five years Malakasis said she would like to see Belle Chèvre products achieve wide distribution across the country.

"My ultimate goal would be to export French-style cheeses made in Alabama – what a wonderful coup," she said.

It's also about celebrating and sharing something that's made with a lot of care to a wider audience, Malakasis continued.

Two Decades Ahead Of The Trend

If you think about southern culture, for some reason, cheese plays a very small part, Malakasis said. The growing southern specialty cheese movement has a lot to do with folks wanting to stay on the farm and make great products with the milk.

"Liz and Tom were pioneers, making cheese in the south 20 years ago," Malakasis said. "Even in other parts of the country 20 years ago, there weren't many artisan cheese makers. It was not part of the fabric of America. When you thought great cheese, you thought about something that was imported."

"Belle Chèvre was well ahead of that trend, and I'm proud to be a part of it," she continued.

For information, contact Tasia Malakasis at (800) 735-2238 or visit www.bellechevre.com. r



Tasia Malakasis is the new owner of Fromagerie Belle Chèvre. She wants to promote the democratization of the company's goat cheeses.