

# MONTEREY COUNTY WEEKLY

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## HITTING BIG

SALINAS BOXER RUBEN VILLA  
AND HIS 14-0 RECORD ARE  
READY FOR SOME SHOWTIME. 18

By Charles Montesa



# Herd Mentality

Once a famed and reclusive cheesemaker, Charlie Cascio and his goats are now a resort hit.

By Dave Faries



Charlie Cascio with one of his herd at Carmel Valley Ranch. He first learned to tend goats in the Alps and, he says, "I loved it."

Charlie Cascio is eager to introduce his team, but they just stare blankly as he makes the rounds.

"Nobody wants to come out and see me," he observes with a chuckle—and perhaps a hint of disappointment. Cascio, after all, saved them from the devastating Soberanes Fire in 2016, which destroyed much of his farm. He also helped get them set up in new digs at Carmel Valley Ranch. But it seems that new bedding is of more interest than a visit from Cascio, at least on this particular afternoon in late December.

His team—a small herd of eight Saanan goats, a breed native to Switzerland—are all pregnant. Soon, they will give birth and begin producing milk, and that will allow Cascio to turn his attention once again to the nuances of artisanal cheese.

Cascio and his Big Sur ranch, Sweetwater Farm, had become famed for small batches of organic, cave-aged raw goat milk cheeses. After escaping the fire, he received an offer from Carmel Valley Ranch Chef Tim Wood—not just to shelter the animals, but to make them part of the resort's artisan program.

Yes, Carmel Valley Ranch is a luxury hotel and spa complex, with a golf course, suites and all the opulence one would expect. However, the grounds also feature an organic garden, an apiary, chickens and even a salt house. These are tended by professionals like beekeeper Christopher Riley and "Sultan of Salt" (their words) Bob Kirkland. Guests are encouraged to interact with the artisans, to take programs on beekeeping or animal husbandry.

"It's almost an eco-tourism destination," Cascio observes. "I've never seen another ranch offer a goat project."

Perhaps that's why questions guests ask are so fundamental. People want to know the difference between cow's milk and goat's milk. They register surprise when told only nursing goats give milk.

It's pretty much the same each time. But Cascio appreciates the interest.

"If I was a teacher in high school, I'd be getting the same questions, over and over," he points out. "If it were boring, I wouldn't be doing it."

There are a couple of things to know about Cascio. First, he has been an educator for quite some time. Sweetwater Farm was part of the WWOOF program, or World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms, a volunteer exchange in which those wanting to learn organic and sustainable practices traded labor for room and board at the ranch.

## "I've never seen another ranch offer a goat project."

Despite the Soberanes Fire sweeping away much of what he owned, Cascio still lives at Sweetwater Farm. One of the houses used by WWOOF volunteers escaped damage, so he was able to move in after a little restoration.

"It was the students' party house," he says, smiling. "But I didn't have to build from scratch."

Second, little if anything in his life has been dull. He served as head chef at Esalen Institute from 1998 to 2004, he spent a total of 13 years living in Europe, most of the time in professional kitchens—including a stint as the private chef for members of Belgium's royal family.

Cascio's time overseas began as a simple three-month quest to trace his

Italian roots. That was five decades ago. He was 22 at the time, and months could be stretched into years without interrupting some career path. Then in 1972 a chance encounter led to an opportunity to help a French shepherd tend 50 goats in a remote part of the Alps.

"That's when I got a taste of it," Cascio says. "The whole lifestyle was fascinating."

He describes a self-sufficient way of life. Activities, habits and food on the dinner table swayed with the seasons. Modern interruptions were rare.

Cheesemaking came readily to the trained chef. He describes it as a combination of microbiology and recipes. And with time in the Alps and a decade in Provence, he picked up both.

And then there are the goats: The Saanan breed is one of the largest, and they are also known for being prolific milkers. Cascio explains they are quite intelligent as well, and he points to Peggy—he knows their names and personalities—and tells how she observed his routine of retrieving their feed from a storage area and noticed how a twist of the handle opened the door.

"One day Peggy puts her mouth on it and goes in," he recalls, again chuckling.

Cascio plans to resurrect Sweetwater Farm with a grove for olive oil. But he's also now a fixture at Carmel Valley Ranch, along with his goats. And his cheeses. For the moment he's keeping silent on anything else.

"There have been many interesting experiences, but you'll have to wait," he says, teasing something in the works.

Oh—one other thing. That story about him waiting out the fire in his cheese caves? Didn't happen, or so he says.

"I went down to Rocky Creek," Cascio says. "I could see the whole ridge burn."

## STREET TALK

### QUESTION:

What's the hardest goal you've worked towards?

### FOLLOW-UP:

What goals are you focused on in 2019?



**SEBASTIAN BERLANGA**  
Bartender | Salinas

**A:** Helping my grandma fix up some properties. She buys and sells houses in the Salinas area and I've helped her with a lot of the remodeling work.

**Be Best:** I'd love to create something of my own by opening my own business.



**NATALIE DILLON**  
Student | Monterey

**A:** My education. Studying literature has helped me be positive when telling a story and it's also allowed me to find my voice.

**Engine On:** I want to focus on saving money so I can buy a car. I've got my eyes on a new Honda.



**STEVE STERKENBURG**  
Navy Recruit | Grand Rapids, MI

**A:** I earned a degree in economics—it was one of the hardest things I've ever done.

**Ring Thing:** I'm getting married at the end of the year.

### ASKED IN Downtown Monterey.

By Matthew Koller