

# Alabama People & Places™

## Top Notch

Tasia Malakasis creates award-winning cheeses at Belle Chèvre in Elkmont.

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Tasia Malakasis, owner of Belle Chèvre, left the high-tech world of software to run the goat cheese company in Elkmont. The creamery's products have won more than 50 national awards.



Who knew? Belle Chèvre creamery near Elkmont produces fine goat cheese.

By **Marti Buckley Kilpatrick**

## Down-home Blue-Ribbon Cheese

**T**asia Malakasis loves making cheeses and taking on challenges.

“My favorite part is finding somebody who says, ‘I don’t like goat cheese,’ and then having them try it,” says Tasia, owner of Belle Chèvre creamery near Elkmont. “I want to encourage people to know and love it.”

**Consumer and Creator** Not too long ago, Tasia was just another Belle Chèvre enthusiast. A Huntsville native, she stumbled across the small creamery’s cheeses while living in New York eight years ago. “I didn’t know about it at all until I found some in a Dean & DeLuca store,” she says. “I thought, ‘Here’s this goat cheese made not far from where I grew up in

Alabama, and it’s ranked among the world’s best.’”

Having already enjoyed a successful career in software marketing technology, Tasia wasn’t looking for a new job. “But Belle Chèvre got into my subconscious. I couldn’t stop thinking about it,” the former “frustrated foodie” recalls.

So she contacted Liz Parnell, the creamery’s founder and owner. “I kept thinking that this is what I wanted to do,” Tasia says. “You can get excited about software, but you can’t eat it. For me, the fear of not doing what I loved was greater than just sitting back and doing the same thing.”

Her doggedness paid off. Liz shared her cheese-making secrets with Tasia and eventually sold her the creamery.

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Tasia gets the milk for her cheeses from the well-kept goats of Leslie Spell's Humble Heart Farms.



**“I think the South has something to be proud of with this creamery because it’s considered one of the world’s best.”**

TASIA MALAKASIS

### **Making Big Cheeses in Small Spaces**

For a place that turns out six different products honored by the American Cheese Society more than 50 times, Belle Chèvre’s facility is remarkably small and simple.

“There’s nothing fabulous about it,” Tasia explains.

“It’s just two rooms.”

She’s not exaggerating. One room houses a giant pasteurizer, two industrial-style stainless steel tables, and shelves of labels, cheesecloths, and other supplies. The second serves as a combination office and packing room where eight employees ready cheeses for shipment all over the country.

At first glance, cheesemaking seems a simple process, until you spend a day with Tasia.

After gathering fresh goat’s milk from the nearby Humble Heart Farms, owned by Leslie Spell, she pours it into the pasteurizer to be heated. As the milk coagulates, a thick substance known as curds separates from a thinner liquid called whey.

The goey mixture then goes onto cheesecloth, which catches the curds and drains away the whey. The entire

process takes a day or two, and Tasia admits there’s a little magic involved when her employees start working. “I always want them to be thinking happy thoughts when they touch the cheese,” she says. “We want people to feel loved when they’re eating this product.”

Workdays find Tasia exchanging jokes, rolling curds into log-shaped cheeses, or pouring olive oil and spices into cheese-filled jars with Margaret Posey and Viola Mills, two longtime employees who have been at the creamery almost since its inception. “You have to be really gentle,” Tasia says. “It’s a more hands-on kind of process than a scientific one.”

**Spreading the Flavor** In addition to producing award-winning cheeses, Tasia is also on a mission to spread the good news about her locally made products.

“When Liz started 19 years ago, there wasn’t a lot of excitement about goat cheese in the South,” Tasia says. “I want to encourage people to try it. I hate that we still sell more in New York and California than in Alabama. I



For her Chèvre de Provence Tasia ages cheese discs for three months in a mixture of olive oil and herbs.

want to make it accessible.”

Tasia peddles her wares to stores, restaurants, and housewives. One week she may host a party at a home in Huntsville to boost awareness of her products. Another finds her traveling to restaurants, introducing chefs to her world-renowned Fromage Blanc (an extremely soft cream cheese) or Tuscan Chèvre (a spreadable cheese with olive oil and sun-dried tomatoes).

“It’s wonderful to have people like Frank Stitt of Highlands Bar and Grill in Birmingham say, ‘We use this cheese, and we love it,’ ” she says. “I think the South has something to be proud of with this creamery because it’s considered one of the world’s best.”

The folks at Belle Chèvre don’t take that recognition for granted, however. As Tasia reaches down and snags a piece of freshly drained goat cheese—in the name of quality control, of course—she smiles. “We taste some every day,” she says. “It’s a tough job, but somebody’s got to do it.” ●

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**Belle Chèvre:** 26910 Bethel Road, Elkmont; [www.bellechevre.com](http://www.bellechevre.com) or 1-800-735-2238. You can also find it in specialty grocers such as Dean & DeLuca and Whole Foods Market.