

# gather 'round the table

THE CREATIVE FORCE BEHIND BELLE CHEVRE HAS A NEW COOKBOOK - AND ABOUT A MILLION MORE IDEAS FOR TAKING THE FOODIE WORLD BY STORM

BY ANNA CLAIRE VOLLERS | PHOTOS BY STEPHANIE SCHAMBAN & ERIN COBB

Talking with Tasia Malakasis is like chatting with one of your girlfriends – you know, the lovely one with the killer shoes who somehow manages to be both down-to-earth and wildly successful.

Malakasis is the hometown girl made good, a one-woman powerhouse whose passion for cheese has rebranded a business that's quickly becoming a household name nationwide. She's energetic and creative, with seemingly endless ideas for building her brand. She's also gracious and friendly, and talks willingly about the ups and downs of running a growing company.

Malakasis is the owner and president of Belle Chevre, an award-winning goat cheese producer based near Elkmont, Ala. She's a Huntsville native – she attended Whitesburg Middle, Grissom High and UAHuntsville – and now lives in a polished little house in the Village of Providence with her 9-year-old son, Kelly.

Her kitchen is a lot like its owner – chic, yet laid back. Warm neutrals and natural textures play well in a space where you'd have a hard time deciding between curling up on the bench at the rustic dining table or perching on a bar stool to watch Malakasis work her magic in the small kitchen. Although food is her business, it's also her passion, so the kitchen is where you'd find her more often than not.



Stephanie Schamban | photography

## GREEN APPLES WITH CHÈVRE AND SMOKED TROUT

"If I've got five minutes of free time, what am I thinking about? I'm thinking about food," she says. "If I've got extra time, I want to spend it in the kitchen."

And she does. She holds Wednesday night cooking classes – complete with 10-12 guests and a full meal with wine pairings – in her own kitchen. On Sundays, she likes to invite friends over for a big Sunday dinner.

"I love to cook a ton, and I'm not going to eat it all by myself, so I started these Sunday suppers so people can just come," she explains. "The front door's open and I've got the food, some champagne or wine, and kids are running in and out the back doors. I do it not because I want to feed the neighborhood or feed my friends; it's really a selfish thing. I do it because I love to cook."

You've probably heard Malakasis's origin story: how she spent 15 years in a corporate high-tech job, but also attended

the Culinary Institute of America to indulge her passion for food. One day in a food shop in Manhattan, she picked up a cheese and was stunned to see it was produced at a small creamery not far from her hometown. Eventually she quit her job, moved back to Alabama, and learned the art of cheesemaking at Belle Chevre before acquiring the business in 2007. Belle Chevre – it means 'beautiful goat' or 'beautiful goat cheese' – has been featured in a variety of media



Stephanie Schamban | photography

## MAC AND TWO CHEESES WITH CARAMELIZED SHALLOTS

*Reprinted from Tasia's Table*

*Serves 4-6*

3 tablespoons butter, plus more for baking dish

3 cups (about 6) large shallots, sliced

8 ounces small elbow macaroni (2 cups), uncooked

1 1/4 cups half-and-half

2 1/2 teaspoons hot sauce (such as Cholula)

2 cups (packed) cheddar cheese, extra-sharp,  
coarsely grated

1 1/2 tablespoons all-purpose flour

2/3 cup Belle Chèvre goat cheese, crumbled

Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Butter 11x7x2-inch glass baking dish. Melt 3 tablespoons butter in heavy large skillet over medium-high heat. Add shallots; sprinkle with salt and pepper. Cover and cook 5 minutes, stirring often. Reduce heat to medium. Cook, covered, until shallots are deep brown, stirring often, about 6 minutes.

Meanwhile, cook macaroni in large saucepan of boiling salted water until just tender but still firm to bite, stirring occasionally; drain well. Reserve pan. Bring half-and-half and hot sauce to simmer in same saucepan over medium heat. Toss cheddar cheese and flour in medium bowl to coat; add to half-and-half mixture. Whisk until sauce is smooth and just returns to simmer, about 2 minutes. Mix in pasta. Season with salt and pepper. Spread pasta mixture in prepared dish. Top with shallots, then goat cheese. Sprinkle with pepper. Bake until heated through, about 15 minutes.

*Stephanie Schamban | photography*





## TASIA AT HOME

Malakasis's favorite thing to cook for herself is soup.

"Soups are totally my comfort food," she says. "If I don't have anything in my fridge, I'll make egg drop soup. And braises - beef and pork and lamb. Cook it in wine for a couple of hours, and it can't be bad."

Erin Cobb | photography

## BELLE AND THE BEES STUFFED FRENCH TOAST

Reprinted from *Tasia's Table*

A perfect breakfast or snack, this is a more nutritious version of French toast. Lightly sweetened goat cheese is the surprising, delicious filling for sweet bread. Strawberries add some freshness to the honey-flavored goat cheese, tucked in the toasty bread.



outlets, from *Southern Living* to the *Today Show*. The company offers several lines of award-winning goat cheeses and products, with even more planned in the near future.

"I left a career that I liked," Malakasis explains, "but I'm now doing something I love."

### THE BOOK

Her most recent endeavor is her first cookbook, which published in September. *Tasia's Table* is full of stories and recipes reflecting her Southern roots and Greek heritage, as well as her passion for food shared with friends and family.

"I had an idea when I bought the business," she says, "that people think of goat cheese in two ways; well probably mostly one: twice a year when they have a wine and cheese party. It's like an entertaining cheese, and how else do you use it? So I thought, what if I did a book that would just be about goat cheese and tell people how to use it?"

Except that's not what this cookbook is about. Her publishers at New South visited the Belle Chevre creamery during the book's planning stage and told her they wanted her stories.

"It's kind of a compilation and overview about who I am as a foodie, which I think is fun," she says. "It's a fun book. It's mixed up, like I am, and that's all OK."

*Tasia's Table* is available at Barnes & Noble as well as Harrison Brothers Hardware and other local shops. Find more information and book tour dates on [tasiastable.com](http://tasiastable.com).

### A NEW HOME

"People call us all the time and say, 'Can we come tour your creamery?' And I don't like to say no, but we don't have the space," says Malakasis. Right now, the creamery is so small it can only accommodate about 10 visitors at a time, but all that's about to change.

Belle Chevre found an unusual partner to make the new creamery a reality: the

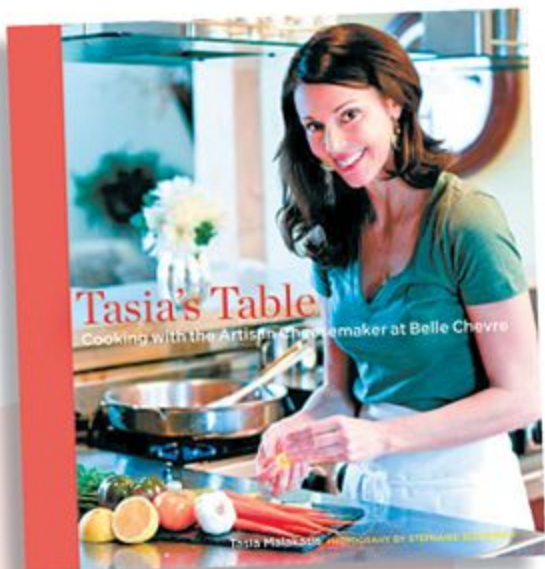
### Serves 4

- 4 slices (about 2 inches thick) dense bread, like challah
- 4 ounces Belle & The Bees Breakfast Cheese (honeyed chèvre)
- 8 strawberries, sliced
- 2 tablespoons butter
- 1 cup buttermilk
- 3 large eggs
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 1/2 teaspoon lemon zest
- 1/4 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1/8 teaspoon salt

Cut the bread slices almost in half, leaving one edge intact to form a pocket, similar in appearance to pita bread. Spread the cheese on the inside of each piece. Follow with a layer of strawberries and close the bread.

Heat pan over medium-high heat. Melt butter in pan. Whisk the buttermilk and the remaining five ingredients in a flat bowl. Dip the bread into the mixture, soaking sides and edges. Fry in pan until each side is golden brown.

Keep warm in a 250-degree oven while preparing remaining French toast in the same way.



## LOCAL BOOK TOUR

### GRILLE 29 | Sept. 22, 6 p.m.

Chef Chris McDonald prepares his favorite recipes from Tasia's Table. Malakasis will sign copies of her book while guests enjoy dinner.

### GREENE STREET MARKET Sept. 27, 4-8 p.m.

Stroll the booths at this farmer's market, pick up some Belle Chevre and get a cookbook signed.

town of Elkmont. When Malakasis first began looking for a bigger location, she wanted to move her business into Elkmont proper, but couldn't find a space the company could afford. She says she nearly cried when the mayor of Elkmont called earlier this summer and told her the town would like to help Belle Chevre finance a larger creamery in its downtown area. As she remembers the conversation, the mayor told her it could be one of the best things to happen to the town. The Belle Chevre creamery will be a destination designed for bringing in visitors, and a leader in the town's rejuvenation.

"We're going to have a café, a little shop, a tour system and gardens," says Malakasis. "Right now, our business model is that we buy our milk. But (at the new creamery)

we're going to have our own little dairy and have our goats out there, too, because you know what? People just want to see the goats. I'm super excited about it."

Belle Chevre's new creamery will be located in a renovated cotton warehouse behind retail shops in downtown Elkmont. It's scheduled to open by year's end.

## A FULL PLATE

As if a new creamery weren't enough, a dizzying number of new products are coming down the Belle Chevre pipeline.

"My goals and my hopes for Belle Chevre are not that we just have the goat cheese you buy for your wine-and-cheese parties two times a year, but that we do fun and creative things with it," says Malakasis.

A line of goat cheese cheesecakes that were popular last holiday season are being relaunched at Whole Foods markets this fall. A brick-and-mortar retail shop in

Nashville is in its final stages pre-opening. The Belle Chevre breakfast cheeses will soon be available in a 1-ounce size, designed for portability. A line of cheese straws is in the works, as is a make-your-own goat cheese kit. Oh, and there are two more book proposals in progress.

A new product now available on the Belle Chevre website is the popular chevre iced cookies. They come in fun shapes like cameras, margaritas and, of course, goats.

"They're really, really good," says Malakasis. "My taste tester is always Kelly, my son. Sometimes he's like, 'Does this have goat cheese in it again?' But with the cookies, he really loved them."

She also wants to develop a line of dairy products including goat milk gelatos, ice creams and yogurts, and isn't stopping there.

"You've got the health aspect of goat's milk – that it's so much better for you – but it also has that hip, gourmet appeal. I think there's a ton of ways we can play with that, and playing with our food is kind of what we do." \*

Stephanie Schamban | photography

