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'It's a Cow -- No, it's a Goat': Experiments in Farming for City Kids

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My kids are 11 and 7 and in their entire lives, they have never seen a cow. Not up close. Not close enough to smell, touch or know how the milk they drink every morning comes to be in their cups. And somehow, I never thought that it was a necessary part of their education. It is a stock eulogy for the wholesome farming life that legions of modern children have never seen a cow. We had become a clichéd statistic of ignorance. This summer, I vowed to change that.

I signed up for a two-week working vacation at [Helena Lake Ranch](#) in Cariboo country in the middle of nowhere in British Columbia. This was a working vacation to slap some sense into our privileged city selves and wake up to how our food is produced. Of course, we didn't have much to offer except energy and enthusiasm. For the generous ranch owners who needed actual workers, this wasn't the best trade. But the owners, parents to three young boys, thought my kids would be good company for their kids and I promised I could cook big, healthy meals and work in the garden.

The dairy barn on the ranch is small and sterile and my kids watch as Kristine, the German workaway, leads one goat after another up the wooden ramp to get milked. Their teats full to bursting, the goats push at the door like kids at a rock concert and Kristine has to straddle the one she wants to milk with her legs while she closes the door on the others. Once she has one goat up the ramp and onto a wooden platform, she locks its head into place in front of a bucket of grain and shows us how to clean the teats, express the first milk (it's no good) and how to attach the milking machine. Expressing milk by hand is harder than it looks. We all try -- and fail.

When Kristine, a hardy, buxom blonde with a long braid down her back, hands over a glass of fresh, raw milk, my kids' jaws drop. They take tentative sips, and my daughter, ever the animal lover, says: "It's sweeter. Yum."

I realize a goat is no cow, though the lesson is the same. Turns out at this ranch, the milking cow, Stella, is pregnant and won't be doing her duty for humans until her calf is weaned a few weeks after her birth. So my children won't get to milk a cow, but they've now seen many up close, first-hand witnesses to feeding and moving the ranch's rare-horned variety. And anyway, this is really a goat farm, with more than 100 goats and four gallons of fresh milk produced per day.

My children help carry the pails of milk into the house and watch as the ranch owner turns it magically into yogurt, chevre and feta cheese. One morning, she turns it into a beautiful, warm ricotta to put on our pancakes. It takes her less than 30 minutes. My children also learn to herd the flock of goats, their rain boots sinking into the mud and the world around them, aware -- finally -- of their connection to the earth and to the food they eat.

When we get back home to the city, I eagerly anticipate their reactions when I set before them a glass of store-bought, antibiotic-filled, pasteurized milk. But they are too busy being kids to notice. They slurp it down and run back outside to play without paying any attention. Then, about a week later, my daughter looks up from the table where she is sitting quietly with her glass of milk, her big brown eyes full of concern, and says: "Mama, I miss the milk at the ranch. This tastes like milk-water. Maybe we could get a goat." Lesson learned.