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## Sweet Smells of Success

by Dawn Fallik  
*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

It is wishful thinking to come to Evening Shade Farms and believe it is the good life. Sit on the porch, wave away the lazy wood bees, drink mint tea and pretend an existence like this comes naturally on an Osceola, Mo., farm.

But Gayl Bousman knows it's only the hard work that makes the good life look easy.



At her farm in Osceola, Mo., Gayl Bousman grows many of the herbs and plants she uses in her soap. Here, Bouseman leaves the house to pick some chicory, which will be used to make salve.



Bousman also raises chickens and goats, using the goat milk as a base for many of the soaps. Above, she swirls some patchouli into an olive-oil and goat-milk soap. (Photos courtesy of Wendi Fitzgerald, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*.)

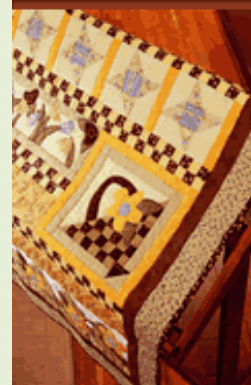
Up at 7 to feed the goats and water the chickens and steal from the bees to make the tea and then weed the garden to get the chickweed that makes a potion before making the dinner and stuffing the guests with peanut soup and asparagus salad.

"It's pretty much a day off," said Bousman, bright blue eyes peering out from a tanned, sun-lined face.

That was before Madonna the goat started having contractions, with two, possibly three kids, and Bousman's daughter called from Kansas City to warn of impending tornadoes.

Welcome to Evening Shade Farms, where scents are spun into soap, a call of "girls, come on in," is directed at the

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goats, not the guests, and even city folk can pretend they've gone country--without getting their hands too dirty.

For the past 18 years, here's where Bousman practiced her secret prayer of saponification--go ahead, say it--saponification. It sounds like a magic word, and it is: Where caustic lye meets solid fat and gels into a lathering, bubbling, smelly mess you rub all over your body in a search for clean.

More than a thousand customers know the Evening Shade name--even if it's only on the pretty packages of patchouli soap or rose moisturizer they get in the mail.

For almost two decades, Bousman hid behind her farm's name. Without a phone (she was part of a four-party line) or e-mail, the only way to get to her products was the old-fashioned way: pen and paper. Customers speculated wildly about her existence. Perhaps she was in the CIA, said one customer, or maybe the witness protection program.

This year, a phone number and an e-mail appeared on the Evening Shade Farms brochure. A slight revolt ensued among the 1,500 mail-order customers.

"Most of my customers won't use the phone or e-mail now. They still send in their orders and their checks," said Bousman, her thin frame folded into a chair, gnarled hands wrapped around a jelly glass of iced tea. Although she is starting to distribute her products through different stores, most customers discover her products through word-of-mouth or by chance at a summer craft show.



At the end of the day, Bousman and her Australian shepherd, Zoi, round up the goats to lead them to the barn for the evening. At left is Madonna, a pregnant goat who will deliver soon.



Bousman lets soap cure for at least 30 days. (Photos courtesy of Wendi Fitzgerald, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*.)

Bousman calls the mix of chemistry, spice and suds her "passion." It began at her grandmother's shoulder as a child in Arkansas, growing up in a small town called Evening Shade (yes, the same one as the television show). Many years later, a bout of psoriasis sent her back to the lessons she learned as a child, trying to make a soothing olive oil soap.

"I barely remembered it, but I remembered enough to get started," she said.

Some lessons came hard, particularly the one about how lye and aluminum don't mix--the pan melted and the caustic mixture hardened into a puddle on the floor instead of into cakes of usable soap.

Friends started asking for bars of the soap, just as Bousman started evaluating her work as a highway road crew worker. She decided to try to sell the soap full time, while living off her farm as much as possible.

"My family probably thought I was crazy," she said.

But they probably knew she'd succeed. After all, this is the same woman who got her welding degree in Seattle, shucked salmon in Alaska and moved her family from Kansas City to the Ozarks and went to work on a highway construction crew.

Now walk into her soap house and smell her success. Patchouli, mint and bay rum gel with open air and fresh earth to create a scent that Bousman wears without putting on a thing.

Bousman (who says she is "on the rim of 60") built her own soap house, complete with air conditioning, three years ago, so there would be plenty of room for the soaps to harden for 30 days, a place to store different herbs and scents, a separation of work and life. Last year, she made about 35,000 bars of soap, selling at about \$4 each.

"I didn't realize I worked that hard," she said, after calculating that she makes three 200-bar batches of soap per week, more for the Christmas season.

She is proud that her soaps, lotions and lip balms come from the earth around her. The milk in the "milk and honey" comes from the goats, the honey from the bees, the dose of rose from those in her yard. Bousman holds several seminars each year, from soap making to a "pamper yourself" day offering a facial, massage and lunch on her western Missouri farm. These events are always sold out.

Bousman gets her inspiration from her surroundings, and she never pushes her muse. Last year, three new soaps came to mind; the year before, nothing. She's not afraid to retire those that don't work, like a soap for babies, or the sandalwood soap, which had to end because she couldn't get the quality essential oil on a regular basis.

With more than 17 different kinds of soaps, as well as lotions, potions and lip balm, Bousman's daughters regularly chip in to help, as do two part-timers. They keep the books and clean the soap and send out packages. But the soap making is Bousman's alone, the magic of scent, lye and oil.

"To tell you the truth, I don't know why it works, how it works," she said. "But I'll tell you, I'm always learning."

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**RESOURCES:**

**all-natural soaps**

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