



Gayl Bousman (right) uses essential oils to perfume her handmade soap. Peruvian Poppy (above) is one of the varieties of soap sold at Evening Shade Farms.



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A natural

After a lifetime of searching for the right career, a woman with an organic bent finds soapmaking fits — for now.



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Gayl Bousman pours the mixture for her Mountain Mint soap into molds. Most soap ingredients come from Bousman's farm.



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A variety of handmade soaps created from organic products are sold at Evening Shade Farms.

By Tresa McBee
NEWS-LEADER

It sounded great. Live off the land. Sustain through self-sufficiency. Grow everything yourself. Never buy commercial again. Trade services.

It's the execution that trips you up. "That's just a pipe dream," said Gayl Bousman, who tried to live that dream on 70 acres in Osceola. "I tell people: In this day and age that's not possible. ... I've never been able to pay my propane man by bartering."

A commitment to all things organic wasn't the problem for Bousman and her ex-husband.

"We thought of everything we could do to make this a working farm, and everything we tried failed," Bousman said.

So now she makes all-natural soap. This came after living in the Pacific Northwest and looking for a farm there; cooking aboard an Alaskan salmon-fishing vessel; operating as substitute cook in an Eskimo village; and an unpleasant stint on a Missouri highway crew.

On the cusp of Social Security eligibility, Bousman still doesn't know

what she wants to be.

Soapmaking, however, comes really close.

"You never know where your path will go," Bousman said sitting in a handmade chair on the front porch of her Evening Shade Farms soap house. She's still in Osceola, having added 15 acres to the original 70.

Bousman's manner and voice are low-key, in quiet contrast with her bright, high-energy blue eyes framed by a sun-kissed face.

"When I was 16, I had no idea what I wanted to do. I still don't. What do you want to be when you grow up? I don't know. I never knew I'd be doing this."

ON THE FARM

Soapmaking is a greasy, messy business. But at least you don't smell that way.

"You'll go into town, and people will say you smell good," said Jeanine Jacob, one of three women Bousman employs part time. "People at the bank say, 'We love getting your deposits.'"

Indeed, flavorful fragrances waft within the soap house Bousman built six years ago, because her house "had become a factory."

Want to go?

Evening Shade Farms is located at 12790 S.E. St. Clair County TT in Osceola.

Call (417) 282-6985 for a catalog, or view products and order online at www.eveningshadefarms.com. The soap house is open by appointment.

The annual holiday open house will be from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Dec. 13 and noon to 4 p.m. Dec. 14. Directions are online.

The farm also hosts workshops. Call for details or visit online.

That her farm never became self-sustaining didn't diminish Bousman's ecological sensibilities.

Everything possible is recycled, and ingredients come from what's around her — like the milk from her goats, the honey from her bees and the mint from her garden.

As Bousman discusses her tumble into soapmaking, she stirs a large pot of soap base — carefully measured oil

Winding road in life led to farm

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and fat — that she started the day before and allowed to sit overnight.

"Temperature is critical," Bousman explained.

Combining lye — which is caustic enough to burn — with fats creates glycerin. Glycerin acts like a magnet, drawing moisture to skin. Commercial producers remove glycerin to sell as a byproduct, Bousman said.

"I just think a product should be beneficial in every way. We don't use fillers, we don't use cheap stuff."

Skin is the body's largest organ, and whatever goes on it is absorbed into the bloodstream, Bousman said. That, and her intrinsic organic bent, are behind Evening Shade's all-natural products, which include lotions, a new baby line, gift baskets and seasonal items.

"I always tell my customers, 'If you can't read the ingredients, then look them up or go to something else,'" Bousman said, still stirring her pot of yellow goo. "A lot of products are all synthetics."

With the correct consistency reached, the base is poured into pans, much like cake batter. Color, scent and patterns are added; natural dyes produce color variations.

Now comes saponification, when soap is actually created. Bousman doesn't want details revealed regarding specific ingredients or the steps surrounding saponification.

Suffice it to say the chemical reaction at this stage creates heat that must slowly simmer for 48 hours. Soap is then removed from molds and cured.

"It takes 30 days to get soap ready for you," Bousman said.

By the time soap reaches customers tidily wrapped in tissue paper, it's been lovingly tended to many times.

"That's one thing — everything around here is pretty much hand labor. It takes time," Judy Weaver said.

On this day, she's trimming soap to level it before donning nylon gloves for polishing.

"It's just that little extra," Weaver said, working quickly.

The Evening Shade women work easily together, sharing and exchanging duties.

And then there's the civilized meal break, when lunches are shared and made from whatever tasty items they've brought that day. During these times, they're joined by Zoi, Bousman's Australian shepherd.

AN UNINTENTIONAL PATH

Like much in Bousman's life, becoming a soap lady was unplanned.

She spent her early years in a little town 15 miles outside Evening Shade, Ark. Yes, the same name as the TV show, and, no, she didn't name her farm after it.

"I had it first."

With her parents busy running a restaurant, Bousman spent a lot of time with her grandmother, even after moving to Kansas City.

Her grandmother taught her soapmaking. Bousman remembers watching the older woman make her own lye.

"I wish I could have remembered what my grandmother was trying to teach me," she said.

Bousman graduated from high school in Kansas City, married and had two daughters.

When she and her husband wanted to get back to the land, they looked in Oregon and Washington. The real estate agent pointed them to the Missouri and Arkansas Ozarks without knowing their roots.

They moved to Osceola, living in a house without plumbing for the first year, much to the distaste of Bousman's teenagers.

When her second daughter left home, Bousman moved to Alaska and sailed the Bering Sea.

"It was insanity," she recalled. "When the salmon are running, they're running. And if they're running 23 hours a day, seven days a week, that's what you worked."

Salmon fishing is intense but brief, so during a break, Bousman filled in for the restaurant cook in an Eskimo village. It was summer, and puddles were

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— Gayl Bousman, Evening Shade Farms

frozen.

"It was a trip," Bousman remembered. "I had this little house out in the tundra. I had a five-gallon bucket for a toilet. Someone gave me a Coleman stove. ... I wouldn't do it again, but I wouldn't trade the memories."

Bousman returned to Osceola and, eventually, a dreaded job as a dump-truck driver on a road crew. Being female wasn't easy.

Leaving, however, was. When Bousman embarked on full-time soapmaking, she realized she'd been "living soap" for several years.

"It was just jumping off into the deep cavern. I had no benefits. But life's too short. You have to do what your heart tells you to do. And that's been 15 years ago. I've never regretted it."

Mary Ellen Schneider, a customer and friend, is grateful Bousman took the plunge.

"She's determined to do things well," said Schneider, who lives in Osceola. "I like the idea of people going back to (nature) in a modern environment. ..."

"There's not a pretentious bone in her body regarding anything. And she's very hardworking."

Bousman appreciates her loyal customers but intends to stay small. Growing most ingredients and maintaining quality, she said, aren't compatible with "big business."

Evening Shade Farms is a throwback for city folks. Until the soap house was built, a party line — the kind where people can listen in on each other — was the only telephone.

And, until the farm went online a few months ago, customers ordered the old-fashioned way: snail mail or phone.

"To get huge — I'm not even interested in that," Bousman said. "I'm just interested in providing a good work place and products."

Her 85-acre spot within a much larger universe satisfies her.

"Little ole me, what impact am I going to make in the world? I'm not politically active. I'm

not a great author. But I can make products that are Earth-friendly and people-friendly. That I can do. And I like that."

And with that, Bousman wondered if she could finally stop talking about herself. She has a farm to run.

Contact reporter Tresa McBee at tmcbec@News-Leader.com.