



Owner and chief soap-maker at Evening Shade Farms is Gayl Bousman. Gayl produces soaps and other bath and body products on her farm in St. Clair County, Mo.

By James D. Ritchie

Goat Milk Beauty:

Evening Shade Farms Makes Soap That Soothes The Skin

You might not expect to find a manufacturer of high-quality soaps on the northwest rim of the Missouri Ozarks. But Evening Shade Farms, Inc., not only produces some two dozen kinds of all-natural soap, but a variety of other bath and body products as well.

The enterprise is the brainchild of Gayl Bousman, owner and manager of Evening Shade Farms just southeast of Osceola.

"Everything we produce is my own creation; my own formula," she says. "That's a little scary, because you never know when the creativity will dry up. We do everything by hand and use mostly ingredients we produce here on the farm. My goats produce the milk that goes into our soaps; my bees make the honey. The floral fragrances and herbs come from our garden or the countryside nearby."

For more than 30 years, Gayl Bousman's family has lived on this farm, located where the Ozark hills give way to the prairie. However, Gayl has not made soap for all of that time. About 20 years ago, she suffered from psoriasis, a chronic and painful skin disorder often aggravated by the synthetic ingredients in most commercial soaps.

"I began experimenting with goat milk and olive

oil soaps, in hopes of finding one that would work better for sensitive skin," she recalls. "I came up with a Milk and Honey bar that helped a great deal. It isn't a cure—I don't know that there is a cure for psoriasis—but it reduces the inflammation and soothes the itch and discomfort."

Before long, family members and friends were using Gayl's skin-friendly soaps and the word began to spread.

Actually, Gayl Bousman's soap-making experience has longer roots. As a young girl, she often helped make soap at her grandmother's, at Evening Shade, Ark. (Thus the name Bousman gave to her own operation.)

Pioneer Ozark families often made their own soap, usually from rendered hog fat (lard) and lye leached from hardwood ashes. Mixing lye with fat—any kind of fat—results in a chemical reaction called "saponification." All soaps require this saponifying process,

but not all saponification produces something that could accurately be called soap. Some of the lye soaps pioneers made could be guaranteed to remove two layers of dirt and at least one layer of skin. Gayl Bousman uses lighter oils—goat milk, olive oil and glycerin—to produce rich, creamy bars of bath soap.

"Goat milk may seem like a strange ingredient to put into soap, but it works especially well," she notes. "Goat milk is naturally homogenized; the fat globules stay in suspension, rather than rise to the top as cream as in cow's milk. And the fat also stays in suspension in the soap. It's very moisturizing for the skin."

Bousman keeps 10 Nubian dairy goats, with three to five of them in the milking string at any one time.

Her soap business started off slowly but grew steadily. For the first few years, Bousman made soap in her kitchen, cooking the mixtures on a massive dual-fuel range that burned both wood and propane.

"At first, most of our customers learned about our products by word-of-mouth from other satisfied users," she says. "I began going to fairs and craft shows, where I would display the products. I still get to 15 or so craft fairs and festivals, in Missouri and surrounding states. Some shows we've returned to year after year."

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Demand grew and Bousman added new products to the line-up. Before long, she found that she needed more help and began hiring outside employees. Today, Evening Shade Farms employs three individuals on a part-time basis: Fran Trainer, Jeanine Jacomb and Judy Weaver.

"We three sort of rotate, depending on what needs doing," says Fran Trainer. "We'll each average working two or three days per week, but none of us works as hard as Gayl does."

The way Gayl Bousman does it, soap-making is more art than science; she makes each batch of soap herself. Bousman knows how the soap should look, feel and smell at each stage of the process. It's not a craft easily taught to others.

As if she weren't already busy enough, Gayl Bousman conducts workshops and other events at the farm through spring and summer. The 2003 line-up of short courses included a "Kids' Day at the Farm"; "Aromatherapy"; and "Potpourri Making." And, to indicate she isn't terribly worried about future competition, Bousman conducted a workshop on basic soap-making.

Six years ago, the Evening Shade Farms operation had outgrown Gayl's kitchen, so she built a separate "soap house" with more room for storing ingredients and for curing the finished soaps.

"We now are selling products to customers in every state, as well as several foreign countries," says Bousman. "We recently posted a secure website, although a big part of our business is still done by mail. We have a regular clientele of about 2,000 people and it's growing steadily."

Gayl Bousman likes to know something about the people buying her products. She keeps a file card on everyone who has ever purchased from Evening Shade Farms. That helps her know what individuals want, and she can alert them to changes or new products or special sales.

"We run special sales four times a year and publish them on our website," she says. "Christmas is our big volume time of the year and we begin preparing for it before the first of November. This year, we have a new line of baby products that we are excited about."

Evening Shade Farms offers two standard gift collections, each with an array of body products arranged in gourd bowls (from gourds grown at the farm). The large gourd gift collection contains a pottery soap dish, sampler pack of soaps, bath herbs in a bag, Lip Bloomer lip balm and the sender's choice of 5-ounce soap; cost: \$24.95 plus shipping and handling. The smaller gourd gift collection includes a heart-shaped hanging soap and a sampler pack of soaps; cost: \$12.95 plus shipping and handling.

Or, the folks at Evening Shade Farms will put together gift collections to the customer's specifications.

You might not think of turning to goats and bees for beauty, but Gayl Bousman proves that from Nature, she's got the stuff that soothes the skin.

-Writer James D. Ritchie, Lebanon, Mo., writes about Ozarks subjects for a variety of publications.



Evening Shade Farms produces several gift basket assortments, many of them arranged in gourd shells grown at the farm.



Flanking "the boss," Jeanine Jacomb, left, and Fran Trainer handle most product wrapping, labeling and shipping details.

For More Information About Evening Shade Farms...

Gayl Bousman will send a complete catalog detailing all Evening Shade Farms products for \$1 to cover the cost of printing and mailing, refundable on the first order. Customers with Internet access can download the catalog for free or place an order from the Evening Shade website: www.eveningshadefarms.com

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