

Making Homemade Soap

Jill Bivens/Lovingston



Jill Bivens: soap maker extraordinaire

popped into her head and she googled the subject on the internet and found there was a wealth of information to help one get started.

Jill said, “The more I read, the more I thought, I can do this! When I made cold process soap for the first time, I bought a starter kit with all the necessary ingredients to make a two-pound batch of soap with a man-made scent of cranberry fig. Although I now use mostly natural, essential oils from plants such as lavender, lemongrass, mints and Patchouli, I still like to use the different man-made fragrances as well.”

One of man’s basic needs is cleansing. Native Americans bathed year-round in streams, using witch hazel and soapwort to wash themselves. Early settlers found that lye leached from wood ashes, added to water and melted fat produced a soap that was used for personal hygiene, washing clothes, and on occasion, the mouth of a naughty child!

Commercial companies offer bath soap but there is many do-it-yourselfers who experiment with new and exciting examples of this basic necessity. Jill Bivens, a Nelson County native living in the Lovingston area, is a modern-day soap maker extraordinaire and her products are not only easy on the eyes but excellent for the skin.

Jill began making soap in 2014 when her husband, Jim, suggested a hobby to combat the stress of a high-pressure job. Soap making



Measuring out the lye flakes



Mixing lye and frozen goat's milk



Combining the lye mixture with oil



Blending with a stick blender

Early on, Jill used “melt and pour” soap which a portion of a solid base such as glycerin, goat’s milk, or shea butter is cut off and microwaved into a liquid, adding color and fragrance before pouring it into a mold. This allows you to make and use the soap in the same day. Jill now has her own recipes for cold process soap that takes longer to measure and mix and requires four to six-weeks of curing before it’s ready to use but said, “It’s kind of like making a cake; the difference is making one from a mix and making one from scratch. When you measure everything out and mix it together, it takes longer but the final product is what I call “real” soap.”



Layering the soap coloring

The day I went to talk with Jill she was making lemongrass/charcoal/calendula soap and explained the process as she went along. The kitchen sink was filled with hot soapy water so used utensils soaked while Jill worked. A recipe for the soap gave an exact amount of oils and lye content needed for each batch. A date was written down so she knows when the curing time is up. Frozen goat’s milk was used as a liquid base and before lye flakes were added, Jill donned gloves, mask and goggles to protect herself from fumes and splashes. She measured everything on a digital scale. Three main oils most used in soap making are olive, coconut and palm. Jill used those along with castor, rice bran and almond oil, in solid form. The oils were microwaved until melted and liquid salt was added to the lye mixture (for harder soap). The solution was added to the oils and mixed with a stick blender until thick. Two portions of the soap were separated and activated charcoal was



A sprinkling of calendula petals on top



Slicing individual bars of soap

added, lending a dark gray color to the batter. Jill added dried calendula petals to the mix, along with lemongrass essential oil which intensified the fragrance. She then layered the colors in the mold. A wooden stick was pulled across the batter, making a pretty design when finished. 91% alcohol was sprayed on to help prevent soda ash from forming on the soap, which is a white film that has a harmless cosmetic issue. The alcohol also helped the calendula petals Jill sprinkled on top to stick. The mold was placed in front of a fan to help the soap to cool and, start to finish, the process took about an hour.

After Jill had been making soap for a while, she had a backlog which she gifted to family and friends. Word spread and soap making at the Bivens house began in earnest. An aunt asked Jill what she was going to call her new venture and Jill blurted out, “Fat Cat Soap Works,” in honor of her six beloved cats. In addition to specialty soaps, she also makes lotions and body butters, sugar scrubs, lip balm, candles and gift baskets. Because she is a one-woman hobbyist and it takes four to six weeks to cure the soap, Jill only sells at events that fit in with her busy schedule. She adds, “I am only one person making small batches of soap in my kitchen so don’t look for Fat Cat Soap products in large retail stores.” But Jill’s products are available at The Corner Spa in Lovington and at Old Southern Charm in Colleen and will be available at many upcoming festivals.

Summing up the interview Jill said, “I’m not out to create a huge company. Making soap gives me the freedom to do what I want, when I want and even after four years, I am still amazed when people buy my soap and say how much they love it.”



A small sampling of Jill Biven's products



Gift Baskets made to order



Jill Bivens with her soap display at a local festival

Anyone wishing to get in touch with Jill to ask about her products, place an order, or find where she will be at upcoming events may do so through her email; fatcatsoapworks@gmail.com