



Elaine wrapping Plum Pudding bath bombs for the Christmas market. The basket contains Gin & Tonic bath bombs with dried lemon. **ABOVE RIGHT** A selection of Littlecote products.

'MY SOAPS ARE MADE WITH PURE LOVE'

ELAINE STAVERT'S MOVE TO BUCKINGHAMSHIRE INSPIRED A PASSION FOR HEDGEROWS. THE FRUITS AND HERBS OF THESE, IN TURN, LED TO HER ORGANIC BUSINESS

LIKE SO MANY OF US Elaine Stavert has her best ideas when lying in a nice warm bath. However, this is especially productive when bathing is at the heart of your business. Elaine is the founder of The Littlecote Soap Co, a thriving venture making soap from the purest and most natural ingredients. Her own bath-time is a moment to reflect on the day and free the mind. 'The best ideas come when your head isn't cluttered. A memory from the past or a certain ingredient may spark inspiration for a whole new range.'

She decided to start her soap-making business after a visit to a market while on holiday in France. 'There was one stall with handmade soaps beautifully laid out like a pastel rainbow. My husband Robert and I had moved from London to the Buckinghamshire countryside about three years previously and I'd become interested in gardens and the plants in the hedgerows. But it was at that moment that I decided I'd learn how to make soap.'

As she admits, that was the easy part. Preliminary research revealed that soap-making is carefully regulated by the pharmaceutical industry – every base recipe has to be tested for safety by a suitably qualified chemist and that costs money. Elaine was undeterred. A former cordon bleu cook and legal secretary, she had also worked for years in TV production, which included managing budgets. These roles may sound disparate, but they all require strong organisation. Before long, she had found a perfumier to work with and began researching

soap-making techniques. Robert, a broadcast engineer, was able to support them both financially.

A passionate advocate of natural remedies, Elaine wanted her products be as eco friendly and organic as possible. 'Our soaps are made with love the old-fashioned, cold-processed way, with olive oil as the chief ingredient. We don't use sodium lauryl sulphate (SLS), harsh chemicals, or animal fats. The soaps are suitable for vegetarians and we even use an adhesive tape for the packaging made out of plant material, not PVC.'

When she started the business, Elaine envisaged selling a few blocks of soap at a time – just a cottage industry. However, the converted barn where she and Robert live is on a farm, owned by Ben Hedges and his wife, Pearl Olney. Pearl was also keen to set up a small business – selling free-range eggs – so they joined forces to open a small shop in a converted shed on the farm. Now Pearl is Elaine's business partner and it's an arrangement that suits them both. 'We've never actually sat down and written a five-year plan,' says Elaine. 'In fact most of our decisions are taken over a cup of tea or a glass of wine.'

While the shop takes up half the shed space, the Littlecote workshop, where the soaps are made, is in the other half. Here Elaine, helped by a staff of four, makes the soaps, cures them, packages them beautifully and distributes them to customers – private and wholesale. The latter include big names such as the National Trust, Macmillan and Marie Curie. There's also a healthy ▶



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The Littlecote Soap Co is located on a working farm. **OPPOSITE, FROM TOP LEFT** Elaine with Caroline Heron, an employee; rosehips, herbs and other produce from the kitchen garden and hedgerows; an uncut block of Gardener's Soap; Pink Champagne gift box; Elaine and staff sampling perfumes; soaps cure for four to six weeks; employee Jess Bliss and a customer.



trade making wedding favours and gift sets, and orders via the website. Littlecote produces thousands of soaps, bath bombs and related goods every year, a commercial success that's taken even Elaine by surprise. 'To begin with I sold mainly at craft events and farmers' markets. Then we got our first wholesale customer and it really took off.'

And no wonder. With ranges that include Gin & Tonic (with real gin), Pink Champagne (with real champagne) and Plum Pudding (which includes cranberries), it is obvious that Elaine knows what her customers want. She also has an artistic eye and is proud of the packaging she designs.

Setting up any new business venture takes a great deal of energy, but Elaine still finds time to enjoy the countryside she loves with

Robert. And the kitchen garden and orchard were planted by her from scratch. Now it provides an abundance of fruit, herbs and vegetables, not only for the table, but for many of Littlecote's products. It is also full of roses, including wild ones from which she harvests hips for jam, jellies and syrups.

She may have set out to do nothing more than start a small business for part-time employment, but she has inadvertently created a product with widespread appeal. This year she was even asked to write a book on handmade soap by the Guild of Master Craftsmen - *Bath Bombs* was published at the end of 2008. As Elaine says, 'I may work six days a week, but I would not have it any other way. Life is too short to be doing something you don't love and believe in.' ▶





'I think life is much too short to be doing something you don't love and believe in'



HOW TO...

SET UP YOUR OWN SOAP-MAKING BUSINESS

The research Elaine may have known next to nothing about making soap, but she had excellent organisational skills, honed as a legal secretary and cordon bleu cook, and she was confident about budgeting and staff management because of her work in television production. She also has an artistic eye and a strong interest in complementary therapies, which inspired her to plant both a kitchen garden and orchard. In addition, she spent hours on research before embarking on the venture. 'It has been a huge learning curve, but you have to get everything right before you go marching into the marketplace.'

The finances Elaine and Pearl were lucky enough not to have to borrow money to set up the business. Both had husbands able to support them and, in addition, Pearl and her husband, Ben, were able to provide the premises. 'If we'd needed to rent an industrial unit, we would have had to go to the bank for extra funds,' says Elaine. The initial expense was research into various perfumes, a cost that Elaine covered from her work typing television scripts. However, neither Pearl nor Elaine has been able to take anything but the tiniest salary – 'much lower than the minimum wage' – as most of the profits have been reinvested into Littlecote. Next year, their fifth in trading, they plan to take a more realistic payment for the time they spend on the business. They now produce an average

of 200 bars of soap a day, which retail at £3.50 each.

The hours Elaine is no stranger to hard work, notching up regular six-day weeks and often staying in the office until 9pm at night. 'When I started, I worked seven days a week. Now I take Sundays off and try to go to a spa every Wednesday morning. When you run your own business, you have to learn to delegate – the more you give people to do, the more they take on, which is fantastic. It's a false economy to think you have to do it all.'

The Littlecote Soap Co, 01525 240927, littlecotesoap.co.uk. Elaine's book, Bath Bombs, is published by the Guild of Master Craftsmen. It costs £9.99 from good bookshops.



ABOVE Dried flowers – such as rose buds – are used in many of the soap recipes.

MORE HANDMADE SOAP COMPANIES

Merrywood Linda Hamblen uses wild and cultivated flowers and herbs blended with pure plant and vegetable oils and scented with essential oils. Merrywood, The Street, Mereworth, Kent ME18 5NA, 01622 812755, merrywood.co.uk.

Odds & Suds Jenny Elesmore makes natural soaps using oil from sunflowers, coconuts and olives, blended with lye and essential oils. Odds & Suds, 20 North Street, Ashburton, Devon TQ13 7QD, 01364 654882, oddsandsoaps.com.

The Caurnie Soaperie Traditionally handmade soaps, including all-vegetable soaps. The Caurnie Soaperie, The Organic Herb Garden, Canal Lane, Kirkintilloch G66 1QZ, 0141 776 1218, caurnie.com.

FEATURE HELEN CHISLETT PHOTOGRAPHS POLLY ELITES



Elaine, husband Robert and their Tibetan Terrier enjoy walking on the farmland that surrounds their home.