

THURSDAY, JANUARY 13, 2005

Home DesignWorks

Luxurious and soothing, handmade soaps clean up

Text by Kathy Sharp Frisbee
Special to MPG Newspapers

Little luxuries right at our fingertips are able to dissolve today's big stresses in mere minutes without depleting our bank account. You can never underestimate the power of handmade herbal soaps, as Ann Miller reveals through her Summer House Natural Soaps studio in Barnstable Village.

“People definitely need soothing these days and bathing is all about comfort, warmth, touch and scent,” said Miller, whose home-based, family business hums in their 200-year-old house and barn. There they raise flowers, herbs and chickens and make sensuous soaps inspired by fresh ingredients from their gardens, the pine forest and cranberry bogs around them, and the sea coast nearby.

“People also associate my soaps with their vacations on Cape Cod and the Islands, a time when they are feeling most relaxed,” Miller said. “I had a call recently from a Chicago woman, who said every year when she is at her summer house on Nantucket, she buys a bar of my Nantucket Sea Clay soap for her outdoor shower. This year, after she returned home to Chicago and was missing the summer and the ocean, she decided she wanted to have that 'outdoor shower' feeling all year long. So she ordered a five-pound loaf of the soap. I think a lot of my customers are like that.”

Miller's Nantucket Clay soap is made of mineral-rich sea clay and kelp with scents of spearmint, peppermint and spruce essential oils that lift your spirits. Her soap selections include Lavender Rosemary, French Jasmine, Cranberry, Oatmeal Spice, Bay Rum, Cape Cod Gardener's and Beach Rose. Pink in color, the Beach Rose soap is made of rose hip oil and cocoa butter, scented with rose fragrance and rosewood essential oil. Most of her soaps have 100 percent natural fragrances and colorants and none of the chemical additives included in mass-produced commercial soap products.

“I think people find satisfaction in connecting with the source of the products we use,” Miller said. “So much of what we consume today comes from the vast impersonal corporate universe. I envision an ‘artisanal soap’ movement, just as we have artisanal cheeses, breads, olive oils and the like. It's a European concept that has come to the U.S. Sophisticated consumers value the unique flavors or scents or textures of products made by particular small specialty producers.”

A desire for more natural products is also driving consumers to artisans like Miller. She finds that when people try handmade soap for the first time, they discover how different it is and how much better it is for their skin. The proof is in the soap, which is full of olive oil, shea butter and other premium oils. Mega-manufacturers try to take advantage of this consumer trend, using language about nature and aromatherapy, but as Miller said, “it is just marketing hype.” According to Miller, her business “aims for the customer who can tell the difference.”

Miller's soap products come in 5.5 ounce bars priced at \$6 per bar. Working with retail and wholesale customers, she also offers a variety of soap gift packages, as well as bath salts, scrubs, balms, and aromatherapy mists, ranging in price from \$5 to \$22.

Perfect as gifts for all occasions to relatives, friends, teachers, and coworkers, Miller's handmade soaps are popular as wedding and shower favors, also. They can be boxed and ribboned for mailing. Her products are sold from her online store, which is open 24 hours a day, year round. She also accepts phone orders and can be reached at (508) 362-2366. As her Web site reveals, her soaps are sold in shops from Nantucket to Cape Cod and Plymouth.

"I also make private label soaps for larger outlets," Miller said. "I make a soap for Plimoth Plantation that incorporates herbs the Pilgrims used, and a soap for Coonamessett Farm in Falmouth that contains their own homegrown potpourri blend."

Handmade soaps are touchstones to ancient times. Clay tablets dating to 2200 B.C. mention a soap mixture of water, alkali and scented oils. According to an ancient Roman legend, soap got its name from Mount Sapo, where animals were sacrificed. Women doing their laundry in the Tiber River below the mount noticed that their clothes washed cleaner when exposed to the soapy mixture of saponified acid (animal fats that rainwater washed down the mountain) and alkali (caustic wood ashes).

For Miller, the experience of hand making soaps began several years ago when she was living in Carver as a stay-at-home mom, who joined two other moms in nurturing a little business idea that would work around the schedules of their young children. She had been experimenting with making soaps and donated a basket of them to a holiday fair at her children's school. They sold immediately. Shortly thereafter, a magazine article described how an Ohio woman launched a million-dollar soap business out of her renovated chicken coop. Miller's partners later turned to other businesses, but she continued growing hers.

Miller takes part in about 10 craft shows a year. Her schedule for 2005 is in the works and will soon appear on her Web site. Her business associates include her son Patrick, 15, who designed her Web site when he was 12 years old and is her acting IT department, she said. Her 17-year-old son Alex does cutting and wrapping. They are both into music. Patrick plays the piano and Alex composes. Her husband, John Temple, focuses on business writing for a variety of clients. At times, Miller employs outside help for wrapping and bookkeeping. She also has a sales representative assisting with wholesale arrangements across New England.

Originally from Cleveland, Ohio, Miller earned a degree in graphic design from Ohio State University. Her previous business experience included 10 years as a media producer for a company that staged corporate meetings. She has also been a freelance writer for magazines and newspapers. She savors her soap business for several reasons.

"I enjoy the creativity of it and the variety," Miller said. "It draws on all my skills - graphic design, writing and cooking. I like the sensuality of it, the smells and textures. And I like the contact I have with customers. It is especially gratifying when someone calls or writes to tell me how much they love a particular product. It makes me feel like I am doing something good in the world, however minor." To learn more about Summer House Natural Soaps by Ann Miller, call (508) 362-2366 or visit her Web site, www.summerhousesoaps.com.