

Milking It



Peter and Bunny Merrill with racks of curing soap at Elmore Mountain Farm.

Elmore Mountain Farm is finding success with its growing line of all-natural body care products.

IT'S A LATE SATURDAY afternoon in June, and Bunny Merrill is calling to say she's not sure she'll make it for dinner. "It's Clarice," she says, her voice trembling. "She's whining and crying. She's never done this." 'Conscientious' and 'empathetic' would be near the top of any list used to describe Bunny, who despite her lighthearted nickname is a died-in-the-wool frank Yankee, born and raised in Providence and Strafford, Vermont.

And if animals could speak, the ever-growing collection of four-footed residents of Elmore Mountain Farm, in Morrisville, would surely agree. Clarice, now prone in a bed of straw in the restored barn adjacent to the Merrills' 200-year-old farmhouse, is not some ailing mother-in-law, but a vital contributor to the family business, a natural body care products company called Elmore Mountain Farm. A member of the Swiss Oberhaslis breed

of goats, Clarice produces milk that's a key ingredient in the line of handcrafted soaps that Bunny and husband Peter make and sell from their Website, their onsite workshop and showroom, and a growing collection of natural food stores and chains throughout New England and across the United States. Of course, in order for there to be milk there need to be babies, and Bunny annually breeds Clarice and the other female goats in the family herd.

At this moment, Clarice is in the throes of labor, and for Bunny, the mother of two busy teenage sons herself, this responsibility weighs heavily.

“It’s my fault she’s pregnant,” Bunny says. An admission of culpability might not be that remarkable for a goat farmer, but it’s what she does next that demonstrates her commitment to her alpine-cross charges. Spotting a hoof protruding from Clarice’s swollen underside, Bunny dons latex gloves, lies down beside the animal, and gets the vet on the line. When the latter tells her to reach in and pop the amniotic sac, she fights back her squeamishness and only briefly loses composure. After digging her thumb in hard, the sac pops. Out come Lupin and Lilac, two new members to the Elmore Mountain herd.

Bunny recounts all of this a few hours later over dinner with Peter, their boys, and some family friends. She makes it just in time, without bothering to change out of her muck boots. Racing from one event to the next, fitting it all in, is just a day’s work when you run a fast-growing business, not to mention a working farm and teenage household. After four and a half years, Bunny and Peter have acclimated to the chaos, but with Elmore Mountain Farm’s revenues doubling every year, the challenges of transforming their initial little soap adventure into a full-fledged company keep coming.

Four summers ago, Bunny made her first bar of Vermont Goat’s Milk Soap after a friend and fellow goat lover brought over a bar she’d made. Intrigued, Bunny began experimenting, initially making small batches for friends, and selling it in a few local places. Soon racks of fragrant curing cakes of soap had overrun her kitchen, upstairs spare room and garage. Now standing in her recently completed “workshop” at the far end of the barn, Bunny can tell you just the right proportions of coconut, palm and olive oils to blend to make a bar of soap feel

appealing but not too slippery, firm but not too dry or prone to crack, and that lathers well with just the right-size bubbles. She has learned how to combine natural essential oils into pleasing fragrance combinations like Bergamot-Rosewood and Geranium-Lemongrass, not to mention what to do with all of the cut-off ends and leftover soap scraps: Chop them up, add a touch of parsley powder, and voila! Recycled Green Soap. In addition to soap, Bunny now makes a full line of natural body products including shampoo, lotion,



Milk from Swiss Oberhasli goats is a key ingredient in the handcrafted soaps that Bunny and Peter make at Elmore Mountain Farm.

bath oil and lip balm.

For his part, Peter has become adept at drawing goats in all manner of activities—gardening, doing yoga, kayaking, hiking, sitting on a chair lift—as chief label-maker and artist for all of the company’s products and charity gift cards. He’s also built a goat jungle gym, a milking stand and an assorted collection of soap molding, extraction and cutting tools—all from scratch. He can regale you with all sorts of goat minutia—they will munch a Christmas tree a day when they are bored, which makes their breath smell pleasantly

like pine, for example—as well as the ins and outs of Website construction, bar coding, international shipping, and sourcing the recyclable brown paper boxes, cheesecloth and baling twine the company uses for packaging.

Despite their considerable accomplishments, neither Bunny nor Peter hides the fact that each constantly feels overwhelmed. How many animals do you have? “Too many,” Peter says. “It just doesn’t stop,” sighs Bunny, when asked to sum up her thoughts on being a soap queen. From delivering and caring for the goats; to milking, straining, pasteurizing, mixing, emulsifying, curing, sourcing and blending essential oils; to dreaming up new products, building and running a Website, and communicating with vendors; not to mention marketing, packaging and shipping or hand-delivering the goods, there is always work to be done, and not enough hours in the day to do it.

But Bunny and Peter wouldn’t have it any other way. “It’s very satisfying to produce something that people actually want, and that is healthy and natural,” says Bunny. Peter, who spent most of his former career in banking, relishes the opportunity to do something creative. “Bunny and I work well together. It’s a true collaboration. She loves taking care of the animals, creating recipes, and making the products.

I’ve enjoyed creating the artwork for our packaging, doing the books, and marketing our products, especially in our local area.”

AS WITH MANY Vermont “agripreneurs,” this local aspect is a vital component to Elmore Mountain Farm. True, their colorful and engaging Website has generated customers as far away as New Zealand and the United Kingdom, but there would be no soap or lotion to sell in the first place without the close-knit community of neighbors, friends and small businesses who help make the company run.



Bunny makes soap and other body care products in a workshop at the far end of the Elmore Mountain Farm barn. They founded the company almost five years ago, and revenues are doubling annually.

Nearby Hardwick has received a lot of attention for its many small but growing agri-businesses and its thriving localvore movement, and many of the people involved have become both friends and mentors. “There’s a lot going on in our region of Vermont right now, and we really benefit by being part of it,” says Peter.

But that’s not all. There’s Jeremy, the UPS man, who knows to stop for a package pick-up when he sees the dented reflector sign on the broom handle sticking out of the Merrills’ mailbox. There are the many local shops that save their cardboard boxes and bubble wrap, which Bunny and Peter use to ship out deliveries, as well as untold numbers of people who routinely drop off Christmas trees for the goats to munch. And there are the local vendors, customers and friends who continually supply Bunny with new product suggestions.

Bunny’s vet, for example, asked whether she could concoct an effective bug balm to keep the flies off horses. The result? Lavender Bug Balm, with the slogan, “When it comes to bugs, we’re not horsing around.” Similarly, when Warren Store manager Jack Garvin told Bunny that after using her spruce-orange soap on a camping trip, he was the only person not bitten by mosquitoes, she developed Camp Soap,

with natural insect repellents. The Warren Store has been selling Elmore Mountain Farm soaps for four years, and recently expanded the number of products it carries after the Merrills agreed to make a private-label offering. “We’re delighted to carry Elmore Mountain Farm,” says Garvin, “because they are really great people and the products are great.”

Healthy Living, an independent natural foods store in South Burlington, started carrying Elmore Mountain Farms’ soaps three years ago, and, to hear buyer Courtney Worthington tell it, has expanded to carry nearly all of its products because of the sheer pleasure of working with the Merrills. “They do a great job with the pricing and the packaging, and they’re one of my best-functioning local accounts in terms of communication and delivery. Plus, they’re really easy to work with and that is important to me.”

They may feel overwhelmed every hour of every day, but leading indicators seem to suggest that Bunny and Peter Merrill are succeeding in their venture, by the very metrics they laid out in their company goals: “At Elmore Mountain Farm, we try not to take ourselves too seriously...but we are very serious about our products and committed to making sure that you are fully satisfied.” 🍷



Just the facts

Elmore Mountain Farm

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Showroom and workshop open by appointment only. For a list of retailers, visit www.elmoremountainfarm.com/locations/. On Saturday, December 11, Bunny will be at the “Touch of Vermont Holiday Gift Market” at the Montpelier City Hall from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.