Olive Oil Soap: Ancient and Surprisingly Modern

Over 1000 years old, the cleanser is ideal for those seeking all-natural beauty products

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Ms. Shamiyeh has seen an attitude shift in recent years. "When I first began, people looked at me funny when I told them [the soap] was made of olive oil," she said. But once she clarified that most soap is made from oil—whether vegetable, coconut or some other kind—the appeal of starting with a base of good olive oil became clear. "What you put on your skin is ingested into your system like anything you eat," Ms. Shamiyeh added.

The three London-based Lebanese sisters behind the brand Jardins d’Eden also tout olive-oil soap’s many benefits. "It can be effective in minimizing wrinkles, and it’s considered the best remedy for dry skin, as it helps exfoliate dead cells," said Rima Nazer, 37, who launched the company with her sisters Zeina, 38, and Zahira, 42. The soap’s mildness, explained Rima, is also helpful for people with sensitive skin conditions such as eczema or psoriasis.

Though the Nazer sisters’ company is only three years old, their father was in the olive-oil soap business as well. He founded Nazer soap in 1967 in Tripoli. The sisters grew up there, working for the family business during summer breaks, until leaving for universities in various locales and finally ending up in London. They’ve tailored the traditional soap-making technique they learned from their father to appeal to a luxury beauty market. Their soaps, which sell at Harrods in London and on the company’s website, boost olive oil’s benefits with shea butter and various combinations of delicious-smelling essential oils. One bar uses ylang ylang and lavender to promote relaxation, while another incorporates manuka honey and oats to exfoliate and soften skin.

The bars may sound quite different from the ones their father made, but the technique is still the same. “Our father used to compare the soaps to little children,” said Rima. “We never understood why until we started making it ourselves.”

As she tells it, the process is quite involved. Once mixed and poured into molds, the warm soap needs to sit for a couple of days to solidify. It’s then taken out and cut into small, fragile bars that are left to dry for another four weeks. “Only when this newborn is well taken care of and becomes mature, is it time to let it go,” said Rima.

Even as olive-oil soap gains in popularity around the world, Mr. Hassoun of Khan Al Saboun is careful to cultivate an elite reputation for his wares. “I don’t want my soap to be on supermarket shelves,” he said. He says he only sells to high-end retailers and apothecaries. Still, he noted that his motivation goes beyond profit. “I love making a natural product that’s environmentally friendly,” he added. “It’s an investment in the future.”

MICHELE SHAMIYEH WAS visiting Lebanon in 2003 when she discovered the versatile charms of olive-oil soap. "I found that I could use it for everything," said Ms. Shamiyeh, 33, who was born in Beirut but has lived near San Francisco since she was an infant. The little green bar worked on her body, face and hair—and even as toothpaste and clothing detergent. Finding a good olive-oil soap back in the U.S., however, proved difficult. So she started buying it from Lebanese producers and selling it online under the label Zeetoon (olive in Arabic).

In the past decade or so, demand for olive-oil soap has risen steadily. Bader Hassoun, a native of Tripoli, Lebanon, whose family company Khan Al Saboun is one of the city’s oldest and biggest olive-oil soap producers and exporters, said that 10 years ago he did $200,000 in sales; last year that figure was $6 million—around 90% of it in exports.

It’s somewhat strange to talk about an ancient product in terms of trends. The all-natural cleanser dates back at least 1,200 years, to the Eastern Mediterranean cities of Tripoli, Aleppo in Syria and Nablus in the West Bank.

Its current popularity overlaps with the Western demand for beauty products that are made with high-quality raw ingredients and without chemicals. "My factory is like a kitchen," said Mr. Hassoun, pointing to neat piles of lemon grass, thyme and almonds on the countertops and clean marble floors of the spacious stone house where a team of artisans makes his soap. "I use 100% natural ingredients."