

CONFESSIONS OF A WEEKEND HIPPIE

SUMMER 2012



“Why was I standing in the soap aisle of a supermarket like it was foreign territory?” asks Liz Ingham. “Was I not a clean person?” Liz, from Clydesdale, Victoria, ruminates on the politics of soap.

THE OLDER I get, the less time I spend in mainstream society. This isn't something I planned; I have tried to navigate both cultures, which is the basis of this column.

I can thank criminal lawyer Rob Stary for that element of my personal philosophy. At the time, Rob's commitment to the environment included representing forest protesters in court for free, so Trevor and I spent a lot of time as clients in his office. Rob cut his losses by offering me a job.

One day, in a context I can't remember, Rob looked at me, paused and said “Here's the thing, Liz — you can't judge people.”

One day, someone will write a book on that remarkable man and that will be my contribution.

If you want to change the world, there's no point in just being right about stuff and pointing out who is wrong and why.

You have to understand people, not judge them, and you can't understand them from afar.

For example, after I left the job for Rob (great man, lousy pay), I worked in a high-rise office where the women would sneak little fan-heaters under their desks, because culturally mandated clothing ‘choices’ left them freezing.

Another time, I asked a colleague why he left the

tap running into an empty sink while he unpacked the dishwasher. He replied “Because I'm a clean person”.

The reality of drought is shifting mainstream attitudes to water. Culturally-based office heating will take a revolution against what a famous blogger calls “the international accords governing fair use of women”. But telling people off and blaming them for climate change won't work.

Lately, either environmental awareness has spread or I have given in to the temptation to retreat from the mainstream; I have fewer of those culture-shock moments.

But I had a doozy in a supermarket when I tried to

buy soap and realised there was not one item on the shelf that I could be sure didn't use palm oil, except for the one that used melted-down animals.

I stood still and looked around at the shoppers like my eyes had been freshly peeled. Every time they buy soap they choose between

killing orangutans and rubbing animal innards on themselves?!

So I figured everyone who gives a flying must buy soap at the many ‘natural product’ and body pampering shops in that town. The first two shops didn't know the ingredients but assured me their soap range wouldn't have aaaanything baaaad in it. The third shop had a sign

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saying the palm oil in their soaps was “ethically sourced”, because it came from Colombia where, they explained, there are no orangutans.

I would like to take the opportunity of calling bullshit on the concept of saying something is “ethical” when it was grown on farms whose owners were evicted at gunpoint by armed bastards. Look it up — the latest report has the government prosecuting 19 palm oil companies.

So, why was I standing in the soap aisle of a supermarket like it was foreign territory? Was I not, as my former colleague would put it, “a clean person”?

The answer is: “*Earth Garden*”. In autumn 1999, I read the edition with “solar-powered animal-free soap making” on the cover, made it, then kept making it because it is the most beautiful soap I’ve ever used. *Earth Garden* is such a subversive little instrument; it led

me by the hand into an alternative orangutan universe and I didn’t even notice.

I was in the soap aisle because my olive oil soap tends to turn into snot if you leave it sitting in water. This wasn’t a problem until I had some house guests, so I went looking for proper-bought-soap and learned that palm oil is what makes proper-bought-soap cheap to buy and resistant to snorting.

Basically, at some stage when I wasn’t looking the world must have chosen killing orangutans and evicting farmers over buying a little wire thingo that lets soap dry off between uses. Not to be judgmental, but that’s humans for you.

In the interests of recycling, this column features the original recipe for pure olive oil (castile) soap I’ve been using for 13 years. I leave out the fancy oils and fragrance — it is lovely just with olive oil. I have

experimented with adding a few grams of bee's wax for hardness. There wasn't much difference, except that I couldn't give soap to my vegan friends any more, so I stopped.

INGREDIENTS*

- 1.5 litres olive oil
- 198 grams caustic soda
- 570 grams filtered water
- 25 grams apricot kernel oil
- 30 grams essential oil

*These are the ingredients featured in the original Castile soap recipe that appeared in the article in *Earth Garden* 107.

BASIC METHOD

1. Get your safety gear happening — goggles, gloves, long handled plastic spoon and thermometer. The ingredients are dangerous until the soap is hard.
2. Go outside and add the caustic to cold water very carefully indeed, then wait for the boiling hot lye to cool down to 32°C. Don't touch it and don't breathe the fumes.
3. Warm the oil to 32°C
4. Pour the lye into the oil and stir gently for an hour.
5. Wrap the mix up warmly — either in an esky or blankets.
6. For a few days, spend a minute stirring the oil that rises to the surface back into the mix before work, after work and before you go to bed at night, until the oil stops rising.
7. Pour it into moulds. For years I used clean empty drink cartons as moulds to make logs

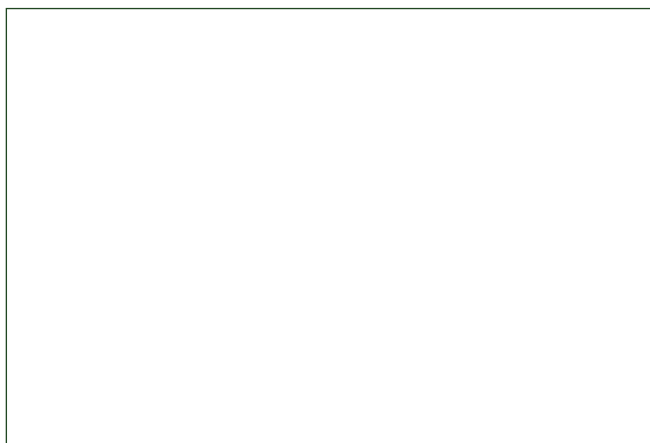
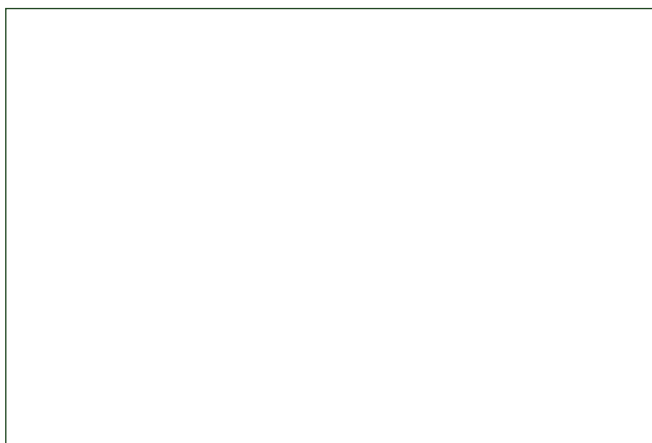


Pouring soap mix into the silicone muffin moulds. Liz's tip is to put the moulds into a cardboard box before you fill them, or put them on a sturdy tray you can later put into a box. They are too floppy to lift otherwise.

of soap. When the mix has dried to "Swiss cheese" stage you peel off the carton and slice it into bars with a hot knife. These days I'm too lazy to keep checking for the exact window of opportunity to slice the soap, so I pour it into silicone muffin tins and put it away until I feel like popping the soap out.

8. Leave it to dry and harden.
9. Let the soap dry between uses.

I make soap once or twice a year, with oil from the lovely Peter and Libby in the next-property-but-one in Clydesdale. They grow olives using natural farming methods to produce the exquisite Orchard of St Francis olive oil. They give me the odd tin of un-sellable oil dregs in exchange for some of the soap I make from it. It's a gentle arrangement.



MAKE YOUR OWN



Popping the soap out of the moulds. When the soap is firm, release it from the moulds and stack it up to harden and cure. "I'm not wearing gloves here because I have industrial-strength hands and I'm about to wash the soap off," says Liz, "but it's probably a good idea to wear gloves – especially if you are a delicate petal." The soap is still a bit caustic at this stage.



Prepare soap for curing. The log of soap in front used a juice or milk carton as a mould. When it is firm enough to resist a thumb print, peel off the carton and slice it up with a sharp knife that is dipped in boiling water and wiped between slices. The soap at the back is stacked so that air circulates, allowing it to cure and harden. Leave it for six weeks before using.

You may have noticed there's no Mud Shed in this column. I have made good on the promise in my last Confession and stopped work on it while I spend more unstructured time in the bush. I'm also in the middle of an eco-house build, but that's a story for another day.

