

the **entrepreneurs**

BEER SUDS was created when sisters who make skin-care products met up with the founder of a microbrewery

Belly up to this bar (of soap)

PAUL DELEAN
THE GAZETTE

A chance encounter at a local entrepreneurship conference two years ago hatched a collaboration as unlikely as the product that resulted from it: beer soap.

The soap is made by Smith Farms, a small manufacturer of all-natural skin-care products operating out of a converted garage in St. Polycarpe. The distinctive ingredient is Bierbrier Ale, made by Bierbrier Brewing Inc., one of Montreal's boutique breweries.

Company founder Charles Bierbrier, 35, happened to be a speaker at the entrepreneurship conference, which sisters Julia and Rebecca Sinclair-Smith attended. He and Julia, 33, had been acquaintances at McGill University a decade earlier and got to talking about their current ventures.

"Charles mentioned he'd read something about a U.S. brewery making a beer soap that was good for the skin, and I looked it up," Julia said.

"Becky and I thought: 'What a cool, novel way to widen our market and launch a men's line. Usually, men tune out when you start talking about skin-care products. But as soon as you mention beer soap, the guys are on board.'"

After reading up about the product and then the daunting trial-and-error process of crafting their own, the sisters launched Smith Farms' beer soap two months ago with the slogan "If you're gonna bathe in beer ... make it local!"

While it uses real ale –



Skin-care company sisters Rebecca (left) and Julia Sinclair-Smith have joined forces with old friend and beer brewer Charles Bierbrier to create a beer soap produced at the Smith farm in St. Polycarpe, west of Montreal.

PETER MCCABE THE GAZETTE

about one-10th of a bottle per bar – there's no discernible beer smell. Julia said the beer boosts lather, delivers nutrients and soothes irritated skin.

"It's the only thing I use now. It's very healthy," Bierbrier said.

The soap retails for \$5.50 a bar and, like most of Smith Farms' products (which include lip balm, hand cream and body lotion), has been received most enthusiastically by health-food stores.

That wasn't what they anticipated when they first came to market in 2010, said Rebecca, 35.

The sisters initially thought they'd be able to sell significant volumes online, "but not enough people knew about us," Rebecca said. "And they wanted to see the products, try them in the stores."

The sisters then approached novelty and gift boutiques with their product line, but quickly discovered some merchants weren't real-

ly motivated sellers. "If people at the store are passionate about it, it thrives. Otherwise, it gathers dust," Julia said.

Operators of health-food stores, however, embraced them.

"They're passionate in general about what they sell, and they liked that it was local and all-natural," Julia said.

The sisters also made an effort to package their products attractively, a detail often overlooked in the natural-product space.

Price was not an object, since customers of health-food stores are accustomed to paying more for what they buy.

The sisters now have stores as far away as Ottawa and Toronto carrying their products, which Julia still makes by hand at the family farm in St. Polycarpe.

Bierbrier's brewery also started humbly. In 2005, it consisted of a single fermenting tank, a beach chair and a phone on the floor in an

otherwise empty warehouse.

"My only knowledge of beer was my passion for it. I was making it in CEGEP and university. My last name means 'brewer of beer' so it's as if it was my destiny to do this," said Bierbrier, who holds an MBA and previously worked in investment banking.

Initially, he even made the deliveries himself, which earned him the nickname "milkman of beer."

"I was naive but determined going in, which is a good thing for an entrepreneur. There's no book on how to manage a brewery; you learn the hard way."

His company now employs about 10 people and has a loyal customer base for its additive-free ale and pilsener – mostly local bars and restaurants, including several high-end ones.

"It's not available everywhere; we pick and choose," he said.

"Our selling point is the same as Smith Farms; we're local, and we know what goes into our products. A lot of people want to support local small businesses. They like dealing directly with the owner/operator."

Competing for consumer dollars with deep-pocketed multinationals is a challenge for both companies, but "ultimately, we feel we'll do well because of the quality," Julia said.

And their collaboration probably won't end with beer soap. They're already talking about a beer shampoo.