

MAKING SOAP

Good, clean fun!

This month **Seren Hollins** has **great fun** making different types of **soap**



Seren Hollins

Seren is a food historian and professional cook, who can be found most weekends dressed up in historical costume cooking up meals for various events and festivals.



started with the Sumerians, who used a slurry of ashes and water to remove grease from raw wool and cloth so it could be dyed. This cleaned, as the alkali reacted with the grease on the objects, converting it into a primitive soap. The more grease and oil that was dissolved by the alkaline solution, the more soap was created, and the better it cleaned. This effect was noticed, and the Sumerians, realising that a little grease improved the performance of the alkali, proceeded to make soap solutions by boiling fats and oils in the alkali before using it for cleaning.

“These new great-smelling soaps are free from artificial colours, and are made with natural ingredients using a ‘cold process’ in which the glycerine base is retained – and best of all, they can be made at home”

Exactly when soap arrived in the UK isn't clear, although soap making in Britain was well established by the 13th century, centred in large cities like Bristol, Coventry and London, with each

city developing its own unique blend. By the 16th century there were three broad varieties of soap available: coarse soap made from train oil (extracted from whale blubber), sweet soap from olive oil, and speckled soap from tallow. Soap was heavily taxed and became a luxury item available only to the wealthy. It wasn't until 1853 that Gladstone repealed the tax on soap, and the industry began to flourish.

COLD PRESSED SOAP

INGREDIENTS

- 64g sodium hydroxide (also known as lye)
- 120g water (bottled, if in a hard-water area)
- 140g coconut oil (solid)
- 122g palm oil
- 198g olive oil
- 10ml nutrient oil (sunflower, apricot, almond, avocado, etc.)
- 13ml pure essential oil

METHOD

1. Wearing goggles and thick rubber gloves, weigh out the lye into a clean glass container. Be very careful – lye is better known as a drain cleaner and will burn your skin on contact. Be warned it has a tendency to ‘jump’ when weighing it out, so keep skin well covered and attempt this process only when you will not be distracted.
2. Pour the lye into a pan along with the water, then stir until dissolved.
3. Measure out the solid oil and melt in a separate pan on a low heat. Add any remaining liquid oil and set aside.
4. Check the temperature of both pans using a thermometer – you are aiming for the lye and oil to be within a few degrees of each other.

Soap has become artisan – a far cry from the artificial-smelling stuff of my childhood. For a time it even became unfashionable, as an array of shower gels and body washes reigned supreme, but the tide has turned – soap has reinvented itself. Hand-made and beautifully packaged, these new great-smelling soaps are free from artificial colours, and are made with natural ingredients using a ‘cold process’ in which the glycerine base is retained – and best of all, they can be made at home.

‘Cold process’ soaps are made using natural fats which, when combined with sodium hydroxide, bring about a chemical reaction called saponification. It's not complex – but it does require care and time – and it can be done in a kitchen with basic equipment. Although not time-consuming it does require patience; ‘cold process’ soap is ready to use after 4–6 weeks, depending on the recipe.

Soap making is an ancient art that

5. Pour the lye into the oil pan, taking great care, then stir carefully until the mixture resembles the consistency of thick custard or sauce.
6. Add any nutrient oils and any additions you require, such as herbs, or pumice.
7. Add the essential oils to the mixture and stir well to combine.
8. Pour the soap into a mould, cover the top of the mould to prevent contamination, then leave for 24 hours to set.
9. Remove the soap from the mould and leave it for 2 days, after which it should be hard enough to cut into bars.



Checking the temperature of the lye.



Adding the lye to the oil.



Adding the nutrient oil.



When soap bases are melted, they are generally over 120°C , which turns the soap into a scalding-hot potential hazard. Be extremely careful about only soaping with heat-safe containers and equipment.



10. Cover your cut bars and leave them for 6 weeks, by which time the acid and the alkali will have neutralised one another – a process called ‘curing’.
11. In 6 weeks’ time you will need to check if your soap is ready. The traditional way to see if it has cured is with the tongue: “If it bites, it’s *really* not ready. If your tongue tingles, it’s not ready. If it just tastes like soap, it’s ready.”

ADDING TO A SOAP BASE

COOK’S SOAP

For soap that deodorises and exfoliates, coffee grounds are a good choice. I call this ‘cook’s soap’ because whether you’ve been gutting fish, pulverising garlic or chopping onions, it is a powerful deodoriser.

Add two heaped tablespoons of fresh coffee grounds to the basic soap recipe and combine with sweet orange essential oil.

CHARCOAL

Despite its messy consistency and soot-black colour, charcoal is good for more than barbecues. It is perfect for home farmer soap, as it absorbs a remarkable volume of bacteria, toxins, and micro-particles. It’s also a great deodoriser and leaves skin fresh and clean.

EXFOLIATING INGREDIENTS

Add anything from traditional pumice powder through to dried heather flowers, blue poppy seeds, crushed almond shell or dried lemon peel. There is a world of possibilities; have fun experimenting.

MELT-AND-POUR SOAP

Melt-and-pour is a pre-made, ready-to-use base waiting for your personal touch to transform it into something as unique as your imagination can create. With a melt-and-pour base the saponification and curing processes have already been done for you.

METHOD

1. Cut the soap base into chunks, place them in a non-stick saucepan and melt gently over a low heat. Keep a close eye on the melting soap: don’t let it overheat, and stir at regular intervals. Once melted, remove from the heat immediately.
2. Once removed from the heat you can add any colours, adding one drop of colour at a time and stirring until the desired colour is achieved.
3. Add aromatherapy or fragrance oils – 5–6 drops of oil is sufficient for one soap bar – then stir in thoroughly.
4. Sprinkle flower petals or herbs into the moulds, or stir them into your mixture, if you prefer.
5. Stir your melted soap mix to ensure no skin forms – if a skin does form, return the soap to the hob for a few moments.
6. Gently fill the moulds with the melted soap, and once filled, leave to set for a minimum of 2 hours.



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