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Pair make soap business using bacon fat, beer

Dennis Gaub, staff writer Jan 31, 2019



Cat Thomas, left, and Melissa Pomeroy work on a batch of soap in the kitchen. The pair started to make soap as a side job.

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Dennis Gaub

A pair of bus company dispatchers, one from Belgrade and the other from Bozeman, needed relief from the strain of their jobs so they started a soap kitchen.

Entrepreneurs Cat Thomas and Melissa Pomeroy dispatch buses, shuttles and other vehicles for Karst Stage, Thomas working at Karst's desk at Bozeman Yellowstone International Airport and Pomeroy from the company's headquarters office in Bozeman. A little more than 1-1/2 years ago, they decided to branch out from transportation in their off-duty time.

"About November 2017, we started our pipe dream," Pomeroy said Tuesday night when she and Thomas got together at Thomas' home in River Rock to make another batch of custom beer- and bacon-based soap.

"We fell down an Internet rabbit hole," she said.

“I happened to be on Pinterest and I saw you could make soap out of beer. I contacted a few local breweries and then I texted to Cat. She said, ‘you gotta do that.’ ”

Pomeroy, from Painesville, Ohio, came to the region six years ago and worked a winter in Yellowstone National Park for the park concessionaire before coming to Bozeman with her boyfriend, a chef at Montana Ale Works.

Through him and his contacts in the Bozeman restaurant industry, “I have access to a whole lot of bacon fat,” Pomeroy said, and the soap business “unraveled.”

She mentioned the day-to-day challenge of making sure Karst has enough buses and drivers to handle its Streamline transit routes in Bozeman as well as the Link runs that connect Bozeman and the Big Sky resort. Thomas nodded in agreement; she coordinates transportation for tourists who land at the airport, want to get to Big Sky, Yellowstone and other local destinations and then need to get back to the terminal for their flights home.

Weather and road conditions, mechanical issues, finding substitutes for drivers who miss work due to illness and other issues and the like create stress for dispatchers everywhere, including Thomas and Pomeroy.

“We wanted an excuse to relax and hang out,” Pomeroy said. Hence, the duo started a limited liability corporation called Operation Eucalyptus that manufactures and markets their soap, named Brew Bars.

The twosome launched their product in December through a popup (a store or other business that opens quickly in a temporary location) at Bozeman Brewing. The brewery allowed them to display packaged soap bars on a table inside the craft brewing house, and Pomeroy and Thomas explained their product to patrons and took orders.

“We had a pretty strong December. We had the pop-up, and we’ve been introducing (the soap) to our friends. We’ve been talking about it forever, and we finally had something to sell,” Pomeroy said.

Operation Eucalyptus has scheduled another popup at Bozeman Brewing on the evening of Feb. 8, that will allow people to buy more than soap. Thomas, from Drummond, is an accomplished artist who has created images that appear on labels of wine sold in Yellowstone – with her name printed on the bottles. Her artwork will be on display and for sale.

Also, Jon Bashioum, a Montana State University graduate student studying ceramics and an occasional Karst driver, purchased a used Karst bus and has converted it into a mobile art gallery that will be at the brewery. His artwork will be on sale, too.

Brew Bars for sale next month will include heart-shaped ones targeted at Valentine’s Day gift givers.

Brew Bars are made with bacon fat, beer, lye, coconut oil and avocado oil and contain no added perfume. The lye reacts with the oils to harden the soap, and the oils make the lye non-caustic to skin.

Thomas said the partners found the base soap recipe online and adapted it to create their own formula. They get more feedback and ideas by visiting “lots of forums online where people talk about their soap,” she said.

Thomas has an agreement with her husband and son, a Belgrade High School student, that their kitchen will be used for meal preparation one day a week. “The rest of the week, the kitchen is fair game for soap making,” she said.

As Operation Eucalyptus approaches its second venture into the public market space, Brew Bars still have a trial-and-error nature to them. Thomas said the inventory for the second popup consists of soap made before the first of the year.

She and Pomeroy try to get together once a week to make soap, but their work schedules may disrupt that timetable. So, sometimes they've had to make a triple batch of soap.