

THE GAZETTE • montrealgazette.com • MONDAY, MARCH 29, 2010

"We wanted to convert people like us, who didn't really think about always buying natural, and buying organic." Julia Sinclair-Smith

SISTERS Julia and Rebecca Sinclair-Smith have launched a line of beauty products made with natural ingredients, packaged in environmentally friendly containers

A beautiful business idea

For the past year and a half, two Montreal sisters have been wending their way through the complex worlds of science, business and environmental issues to create a line of natural beauty products.

Like many consumers who try to make sense of the ingredients in everything from food, to skin cream, to sunscreen, Julia Sinclair-Smith was frustrated by the long and unrecognizable names of substances she didn't know on her beauty products. Sinclair-Smith, who had been working with her father as an engineering-industry recruiter, decided to try to make her own body lotion as a first step toward building a new business for herself.

She envisioned a line of beauty products made from natural ingredients, packaged in environmentally friendly containers, that would appeal to people like her and her older sister and partner, Rebecca Sinclair-Smith.

"We wanted to convert people like us, who didn't really think about always buying natural, and buying organic," she said.

Now, after months of mixing, testing and hunting down suppliers, the sisters have launched Smith Farms, a company that makes all-natural body lotion, hand cream, hair and body oil and lip balm.

Julia came up with the idea in the fall of 2008, and started out by researching recipes on the Internet. Then she mixed up a lotion in the food processor in the kitchen of the family farmhouse where they grew up. She followed it up with a lip balm and was pleasantly surprised by the results.

While she has no background in chemistry, Julia said it wasn't hard to make beauty products with all-natural products. Unlike large companies that are trying to reformulate their products with more natural ingredients, Julia said she had an advantage because she didn't have to replace things like methyl paraben, a preservative that has been identified as a possible carcinogen.

"We don't even have a knowledge of these complex chemicals, so we're just starting with really basic ingredients," Julia said.

The sisters wanted to make their line completely organic and local, but quickly found they could have one or the other, but rarely both. Ingredients like almond oil, shea butter and coconut oil are made from plants that don't grow here, Julia said.

Still, the lavender they use to scent their handmade soap comes from the family farm in St. Polycarpe, a village about 70 kilometres west of Montreal, which is where their company name comes from. Organic beeswax was available—from India—but the sisters chose to go with an apiary in nearby eastern Ontario in-



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Julia (left) and Rebecca Sinclair-Smith have named their company Smith Farms, a reference to the St. Polycarpe family farm where they grew up. The lavender they use to scent their handmade soap comes from the farm, and it was in the farmhouse kitchen that Julia started experimenting with recipes for natural beauty products.



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stead, even though its beeswax isn't certified organic.

"We had to make a sensible choice," Rebecca said.

For a year, Julia tested recipes and ingredients, hoping to develop high-quality skin-care products like the ones she and her sister like to use. There was trial and error: a lip balm turned out too grainy, a body lotion separated. But over time, she was able to develop products that met her high standards, and got good reviews from family and friends.

As the formulas were perfected, the sisters also looked for containers, jars and bottles.

Their aim: to find completely recyclable packaging and avoid plastic as much as possible. Their hand cream is packaged in thin aluminum tubes that look like over-

grown toothpaste tubes, and their body lotion is in a lightweight aluminum pump bottle. Hair oil comes in a small glass jar, and their soap is packaged in a small muslin drawstring pouch that comes with a bag of dried lavender from the family farm and can be used to turn the muslin bag into a sachet.

Looking for small quantities of bottles, jars and tubes made finding environmentally friendly packaging a challenge. Many companies required minimum orders of 10,000 items, something Smith Farms just wasn't ready to do, Rebecca said. So their glass jars come from New Jersey, but their aluminum containers come from a small packaging manufacturer in Hawkesbury, Ont.

One of their goals, Rebecca said, is to persuade more people to try cosmetics made from natural ingredients. Turned off by boring packaging on soaps and creams in health-food stores, Rebecca used her background in graphic design to create visually appealing labels on environmentally friendly packaging.

By this past Christmas, the sisters were ready to bring their products to market, and sold enough lotion, lip balm and cream through family and friends to pay off the

debts they had incurred during production.

That encouraged them to set up a website to sell online. Now they are beginning the process of getting eco-friendly certification, and are developing more products, including a face cream and a line for babies. They're confident there is a market for their creams, lotions and balms.

"We wanted this to be natural, so there's nothing to worry about," Julia said. "We know this is going to take off."

Learn more about Smith Farms at www.smithfarmsproducts.com. Their products are also available at the Alpine Ski Shop, 5706 Monkland Ave. in Notre Dame de Grâce.

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HOMEMADE CHOCOLATE LIP BALM

The Skin Deep website has a great database ranking the safety of hundreds of beauty products. Find a link to it and a recipe for homemade chocolate lip balm at montrealgazette.com/greenlife