



Rural Life



Soap Star: Tiina Laas of 12 Quail Farm. With her hand-crafted donkey milk soap, and her neighbour's donkeys: below Tiina, her daughter Liisa and marketing manager Cianán Redmond

PHOTOS: BRIAN FARRELL

My Week
Marese McDonagh
talks to Tiina Laas

'I started making donkey-milk soaps on my kitchen table as a hobby, now it sells all over the world'

Last summer, Tiina Laas started making donkey milk soaps at her kitchen table in Co Leitrim. Little did she think that less than a year later a global preoccupation with hand-washing would make them a much sought-after product, and not just in Ireland. A self-professed "city girl" who came to work in Bank of America in Carrick-on-Shannon around 2000, this native of Estonia discovered the health benefits of quails' eggs long before she got interested in the nutritional and cosmetic properties of donkey milk. "I lost my job and my health at the same time," says the former public relations consultant, who was made redundant when the crash came in 2008. "I had two frozen shoulders. I could pretty much not do anything." When Tiina first came to Ireland, she lived and worked in Dublin but spent her free time travelling around the country with friends, seeing the famous sights. She fell in love with the Leitrim landscape, with its bounty of lakes and hills, and settled down in Foxfield. Battling with the shoulder problem, she bought 12 quails. "They literally saved my life," she says. Initially she consumed every egg produced on the one-acre holding, still known as 12 Quail Farm, and she is convinced that the eggs cured her shoulder. "The 12 birds kept me company and I ate every single egg. I had

Covid-19 has boosted the business of former PR consultant Tiina Laas, who hand-crafts donkey-milk soap and farms quail on a smallholding in Leitrim

them raw, boiled, in salads, and then in a couple of months my hands started to move all because of quail eggs, so I wanted to help other people." She invested gradually in more quail until she had four different breeds and hundreds of birds, and soon some of the top restaurateurs in the country, including celebrity chef Neven Maguire, came calling, looking for both the eggs and the birds. The quail business was soon "flying", so much so that Tiina's daughter Liisa Keränen, an IT professional, came on board. The pair brought in a marketing manager Cianán Redmond, who is particularly pleased with how the latest venture has taken off. "I started the soap as a hobby but it has turned into a business," says Tiina. "The speciality of the soap is

that it is antiseptic and moisturises the skin." Covid-19 has shut the doors of the gift shops at home and abroad who were selling the hand-sculpted soaps, but the preoccupation with hand-washing has opened doors online. The soap is being marketed as an effective balm for people whose hands are cracked from over-exposure to sanitisers. Tiina first started selling her soaps at local farmers' markets but soon built up a clientele among gift shops throughout Ireland, the UK, the US

and France. Until recently, her soaps were selling in 70 shops around the world. A Chinese distributor with access to 5,000 shops in China, who saw the product for sale on the Wild Atlantic Way, had expressed an interest in doing business. "And then up comes coronavirus and all these retail outlets have temporarily closed," says Cianán. "The clients we had were ordering 50 to 100 soaps but we are now doing a lot of online sales to individuals who are buying up to half a dozen soaps."

Tiina had also won new clients at Showcase Ireland, the annual trade show for the creative sector, including an order from 'Irish at Heart', whose customers pay a regular subscription for a monthly gift box of crafts from Ireland. "This week we are delivering our second order of over 1,000 soaps to them," Cianán says. "We're doing lavender shapes. It's like being in a field of lavender." Cianán is often asked how many donkeys they need to meet demand for the soaps, but in fact the key ingredient comes as powdered milk from Greece and Portugal. "We would need to have 700 donkeys, like Cleopatra," explains Tiina, referring to the legend that the Egyptian queen bathed in donkey's milk daily because of its rejuvenating qualities. Cianán says donkeys barely produce a litre of milk a day, compared to around 24 litres for cows. Pope Francis did his bit to promote donkey milk a few years ago when he said that as a child in Argentina he got it to supplement his mother's milk. She says that imported clays add colour to soaps, while essential oils provide the distinctive scents. "To make good soap you need to be in a good mood. You need to be in love with what you are doing," she says, adding that her base in Leitrim helps in this regard. "When I'm driving home, it's like driving into a picture."

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