

## A different kind of soap star

### Jennifer Morsell's business began as a family tradition

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Jennifer Morsell works on a fresh batch of soap Tuesday. Morsell runs her handmade soap company out of a small room in her basement.

#### On the Web

To learn more about Mountain Madness Soap Co., go to [www.mountainmadnesssoap.com](http://www.mountainmadnesssoap.com).

It started, fittingly, as a Christmas present from North Pole and turned into a gift that keeps on giving.

Jennifer Morsell was assistant to the mayor of North Pole, Alaska, when she decided that, as a Christmas present for friends and family, she would share a favorite piece of her own childhood.

"My grandmother was from Italy and she always made her own soap," Morsell recalled. "She made it the way they've been making homemade soap in the Italy for ages. I always loved that soap and, of course, it always reminds me of my grandmother.

"I asked about getting a copy of her recipe so that I could try making some soap the same way."

She ordered the same unrefined olive oil that her grandmother used and had it shipped to North Pole, a suburb of Fairbanks. She made a small batch, adding some fresh rosemary for a touch of fragrance, and sent bars to everyone on her list.

It was a big hit.

"Everyone loved it and started asking if they could get some more," she said. "It just kind of grew from there."

Mountain Madness Soap Co. was born and thrived in and around Fairbanks. Her handmade bars, designed to both look and feel great, found their own market.

"I called it Mountain Madness because I just loved the mountains," Morsell said. "We used local ingredients whenever we could, and of course I used the same Italian olive oil my grandmother used.

"And I had a lot of fun designing the bars. I think a lot of people bought the bars with the idea of using them for

decoration, and that's fine. But they eventually used the soap and that's what really got them hooked."

Fragrances expanded to include Turkish Mocha, Blackberry Jasmine, Lemon Peel and Carrot Cake – each one becoming a hit with customers.

"I can honestly say that each and every soap I've made has sold," Morsell said. "Some sell faster than others, but they eventually seem to find their own market.

"I've tried some interesting combinations, too. I was intrigued by the idea of making a black soap, so I tried licorice. I never thought it would sell, but it did. My husband and I love sushi, so I tried making one with wasabi. I used a little nori (seaweed) and scented it with a bit of wasabi. It has a clean scent and it's been popular, too."

Like all good stories, love came into play once again.

"I met my husband up there," she said. "He has his own business and I decided to relocate down here."

Mountain Madness shifted its base from Fairbanks to Spokane Valley in 2007, where it's beginning to find its own local niche once again. Customers can order online from her Web site: [www.mountainmadnesssoap.com](http://www.mountainmadnesssoap.com).

Morsell currently is negotiating with local outlets for her products. In the meanwhile, she makes the rounds of local farmers' markets, from Coeur d'Alene to Millwood. Earthlab Cosmetics in Sandpoint already carries Mountain Madness soaps, shampoo bars and bath bombs.

Already she's added new local fragrances to her product line.

"I don't think you could be here and not do a lilac soap," she laughed. "It's been very popular. And we've been working on some new soaps."

Morsell said she's done special favors for weddings – creating soaps to match bridal themes – that have been very popular.

"Homemade soap has a wonderful feel to it," she said. "It feels so much better on your skin than mass-produced soaps. One of the byproducts of the process of making soap is natural glycerin. When they make soap commercially, they extract the glycerin and use it for other things and they replace it with detergent."

In fact, many products manufactured for mass use are not soap at all, but detergents – which are easier and less expensive to manufacture. Technically, a soap is a salt from a fatty acid and is a product of the reaction between a fat and a strong alkali such as lye, potash or soda ash.

Morsell uses three oils in making her soap.

"You can make soap from a lot of different sources," she said. "It's called saponification. You can render soap from any fat. Animal fat was a primary source for making soap in this country.

"In addition to olive oil, I use coconut oil, which is what gives you a really good lather, and I use palm oil, which makes for a nice, hard bar of soap and adds really nice skin-conditioning properties."

Morsell still makes her soap the same way her grandmother did, in small batches.

"It is really satisfying to make a product like this," she said. "It's natural. It's clean. And like a lot of things, doing it the old-fashioned way makes a better product than what we can get from the big manufacturers."