

A Brief History of Soapmaking

In early 19th-century New England, soapmaking was a practical, seasonal household task rooted in necessity. Most families made their own soap using simple, readily available ingredients.

They used lye, which was made by leaching water through hardwood ashes (often maple or oak). This lye solution was combined with animal fats like beef tallow or pork lard, and boiled outdoors in large iron kettles until it thickened into a soft soap. Salt was sometimes added to help harden and stabilize the bars. Soapmaking was typically done by women once or twice a year in large batches, often alongside



other seasonal work like butchering and preserving, and required hard work and experience to balance the strength of the lye for a usable product.



The resulting soap was effective, but far from luxurious. It often had a natural, slightly smoky or “meaty” scent from the fats, combined with the sharpness of lye. While some households added herbs like lavender,

rosemary, or mint, these scents were usually faint and

inconsistent. Visually, soap was plain—soft or roughly cut, and brownish or off-white in color, with little to no frills.

Decorated, molded, or strongly scented soaps did exist, but they were considered luxury goods, more commonly imported or made by skilled artisans in urban areas.

The idea of soap as something fragrant, luxurious, and visually appealing began to take shape in the mid-to-late 19th century with industrialization. Advances in chemistry and manufacturing led to milder, more consistent soaps, and companies began adding perfumes, colors, and decorative molds—transforming soap from a purely functional item into a personal care product.

Still, the New England tradition of soapmaking reflects a much older history. Humans have been making soap-like substances from fats and ashes for thousands of years, dating back to ancient Babylon around 2800 BCE.

Tallow, or animal fat, along with lye, remains a basic ingredient of soap. The process of fat reacting with lye is called *saponification*.

Modern soap makers use mostly the same techniques. The two main methods, called “cold” or “hot” process soap-making, involve a wide variety of oils that are mixed with lye and blended until the solution begins to cure.

As the soap solidifies, the fat chemically combines with the once caustic lye and neutralizes, becoming inert and safe to handle. Lye in its original form can be dangerous, and can cause burns to eyes, skin, and lungs with improper contact. Therefore, be sure

you are well-versed in the process and safety of soap-making before attempting to create your own soap from scratch.

The good news is, what we are using tonight is called the “melt and pour” soap process. Since our soap has already fully saponified, there is no longer any lye present, so it is safe to melt and handle without the hazards that can occur with the other kinds of soapmaking. Melt and pour is perfect for absolute beginners, and suitable for school aged kids and adults alike. (The soap is very hot when melted, so it is still important to be careful and work slowly.)

Sources/Ideas/Education for Soapmaking:

Ethical, vegan & cruelty free micas www.madmicas.com

Brambleberry <https://www.brambleberry.com/>

Nature’s Garden <https://www.naturesgardencrafts.com>

Some wonderful creators I personally love and follow are: Royalty Soaps, La Fille de la Mer (Girl of the Ocean) and Ophelias Soapery



I hope you enjoyed today’s class. Please subscribe to my social media or mailing list for news of upcoming classes/events.

Warmly, Jen Holmes



web www.holmesholistic.com

email jennifer@holmesholistic.com