

## SKIN DEEP

## Soaps, Potions and Brooklyn Buzz

A borough's fashionable status mixes with a botanical frenzy.

By MARISA MELTZER

On a recent Wednesday in the Gowanus section of Brooklyn, at a former can factory built in 1885, jugs of essential oils lined the shelves, shea butter bubbled in a large pot and the smell of lemon grass and lavender permeated the air.

Rachel Winard, 34 and the owner of Soapwalla, a skin care company based there, was dressed in a coral-patterned apron and was busy packaging her best seller, a deodorant cream that she said took six years to perfect. "Out of sheer desperation, I had to start making my own stuff," she said.



Ms. Winard is a former professional violinist who turned to the personal-care field after being diagnosed with lupus, which has a side effect of sensitive skin. The deodorant, which lacks sodium lauryl sulfate, parabens, petroleum and aluminum compounds, has the consistency of frosting and is applied with fingers. "There are professional athletes who use it and people in high fashion and self-professed granola hippies," its inventor said.

Much attention has been paid to the thriving music and restaurant scenes in Brooklyn. But the borough's kitchens and warehouses are also churning out scores of beauty and grooming products. Most of the companies have a natural bent, making everything from aluminum-free deodorant and paraben-free lip gloss to coconut-oil-based laundry detergent and facial exfoliant made with oats and almonds.

While most of these lines are full-time jobs for their founders, perhaps with an employee or two, they don't have the reach of brands like Tom's of Maine, which is owned by Colgate-Palmolive, or Burt's Bees, which is owned by Clorox. But what they lack in market saturation, perhaps, they can claim in homeopathic street cred.

"We give a lot of credit to Burt's Bees — they blazed a path — but they shouldn't be the only alternative," said Adina Grigore, 28, who owns S.W. Basics, a line of natural skin care products that contain five ingredients or less, like their apple cider vinegar-based toner.

Not that she's scornful of expanding her company, which is based in Greenpoint. "Our ideal is to be placed next to La Mer or a Kiehl's, and for people to look at our product and realize it's less expensive and better for them," she said.

Other proprietors have simpler ambitions: Tara Pelletier, 30, who runs Bushwick-based Meow Meow Tweet with her partner Jeff Kurosaki, 32, said their interest in natural beauty began with the concept of urban homesteading. "We got really interested in how we could live simply but in a metropolitan place, probably about the same time the rest of Brooklyn got into it," she said.

They had admired handmade soap from a family friend's goat farm. "We had never tried anything but commercial soap," Ms. Pelletier said. "We were converts. We didn't think twice about trying to make something ourselves. We thought, what if the soap could support our lifestyle?"

So she said she turned to recipes that



Top, Tara Pelletier and Jeff Kurosaki of Meow Meow Tweet at their studio, where a product is being poured, left. Above, in her studio, Talima Davis, the owner of Limegreen, whose products include a lemon grass linen and room spray, below. Right, Theo Kogan of Armour Beauty.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY HIROKO MASUIKE/THE NEW YORK TIMES (MEOW MEOW TWEET); MICHAEL NAGLE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES (LIMEGREEN); AND DANNY CHITIS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES (KOGAN)



would have been around in Colonial times. Her dabbling led to the creation of products like fennel orange soap and cedar sage body oil.

"We try to keep things simple but also have 'utilitarian luxury,' as we call it," Ms. Pelletier said. "We want them to smell lovely and natural because they smell like themselves."

Meow Meow Tweet, Soapwalla and Scout Soap, in Carroll Gardens, all make a point of being not just natural but vegan. "They are palm-oil-free, and use strictly all natural, vegetable ingredients," said Scout Soap's owner, Colleen Keane, 32. "I even source some of my essential oils from Anwaar, located on Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn." ("Sourcing" is common shorthand among this crowd for "shopping ethically and locally.")

Some go further, taking courses in herbalism, like Emma Graves, 34, an aesthetician who is certified by the green medicine program at the New York Open Center. She started making products for her own clients because "I didn't like anything else that was out there," said Ms. Graves, who lives in Carroll Gardens. "My philosophies were so dramatically different from what I could find."

With Molly Watman, 32, Ms. Graves makes products under the name Between You and the Moon. These include Mineral Mist, for sensitive skin, from rose and orange blossoms. The line is sold at their newly opened Columbia Street boutique, Brooklyn Herborium. "They are about using sources from nature that are going to benefit you and support the skin healing itself rather than a product trying to convince your skin to do something," Ms.

Graves said.

"A lot of people are taking more notice into what's in their skin care, not just the Whole Foods crowd," said Megan Brame-Finkelstein, 29, who started Metropolis Soap Company in Greenpoint. The company won a best new product award at the Summer 2012 New York International Gift Fair for its vegan lip creams, which include ingredients like sunflower and anise oils.

"I think it's become a turn in the industry," said Theo Kogan, 43, who owns Armour Beauty, in Park Slope. "If you walk the aisles of Sephora, there's Josie Maran and Tarte," she said, referring to two popular cosmetics brands that emphasize their natural ingredients.

In a city where even local bodegas carry organic almond milk, it's no surprise that larger retailers are dabbling in natural cosmetics. Limegreen, a Bedford-Stuyvesant maker of natural products owned by Talima Davis, was recently featured at the local Walgreen's. The clothing chain Anthropologie sells MCMC Fragrances, which is based in Greenpoint.

"We have found our comfort zone in clothing stores," said MCMC's owner, Anne Serrano-McClain. Her line, which includes perfume oils with names like Hunter (a blend of tobacco absolute, organic Bourbon vanilla and balsam fir, "best worn with a flannel shirt"), is also sold at Bird in Brooklyn, as well as at Liberty, in London.

Soapwalla is now carried at the chic department store Colette, in Paris. When she visited last year for an event, Ms. Winard said, "All anyone wanted to talk about was Brooklyn. Like it's a mythical place where unicorns fly. It's a global interest." Ms.