

From quail eggs to donkey milk soap, Leitrim raises the bar



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*Tiina Laas Pictured with visiting neighbours' donkeys on 12 Quail Farm.
Image source: Brian Farrell*

A Leitrim-based woman who supplied supermarkets and restaurants around the country with quail eggs, has now moved into the production of handcrafted soap containing donkey milk.

Having started her quail egg venture, 12 Quail Farm at Foxfield, Fenagh, in 2013, Estonian woman Tiina Laas built the 1ac enterprise up with 12 quail. She bred them and eventually supplied quail eggs to shops and restaurants across the country.

“Quail eggs are known as a superfood with each small egg having **four times** the nutrition of a normal hen’s egg,” Tiina said.

The quail are kept indoors as they don’t like the cold and wet Leitrim weather, she said.

Donkey milk soap

While continuing with her quail egg venture Tiina, who came to live and work in Ireland about 10 years ago, has developed another venture based on donkey milk soap, the Soap Studio.

“The benefits of donkey milk have been known for thousands of years. Over 2,000 years ago, Queen Cleopatra kept 700 donkeys to bathe in their milk as it’s naturally soothing and moisturising. It is great for people with sensitive skin and psoriasis,” she said.

“It’s also great to drink – light with a slight sweet taste – and is used to treat a whole range of illnesses, from upset stomach to asthma.”

“The founding father of medicine, Hippocrates, prescribed the drinking of donkey milk as treatment for 35 different ailments, over 2,500 years ago. The pH of donkey milk is almost identical to that of human breast milk, so it forms a more natural fit with our bodies than cow’s milk, for example,” she contended.

The Soap Studio buys in powdered milk from two donkey farms in Portugal and Greece.

“Donkeys love warm climates, hence their popularity along the Mediterranean and Northern Africa,” said Tiina.

“It isn’t possible to source donkey milk commercially in Ireland at present. However, as our business continues to expand, we fully expect to milk from our own herd of donkeys in the future.”

The soap making started out as a hobby for Tiina, who made it from her kitchen table and sold it at farmers’ markets.

“We then took this concept and developed branding and packaging, set up an online store and approached retailers to boost sales,” she said.

“The advent of Covid-19 really limited sales of quail eggs to supermarkets and restaurants in particular. We were also selling our handmade soaps to 35 retailers at the time and they all closed overnight.”

“Luckily, we were able to continue selling worldwide from our website, which had orders from North America to China, all during the pandemic. Christmas in particular was hugely busy as people were buying presents online and we were lucky enough to be interviewed on the Joe Duffy radio show which was a real boost,” said Tiina.

“As retail has slowly been reopening we’ve also been adding new retailers, about 70 now, including in this country, other parts of Europe, Canada and the US.”



Photo: 12 Quail Farm Facebook

The future

“Our main focus now is on the donkey milk soap range and expanding our number of retail stockists worldwide. We are in discussion with distributors to high end retail stores in China for example,” said Tiina.

“We have a unique product in that our soaps are not just bars of soap but come in the form of little sculptures which are hugely popular as gifts but also very practical as they’re soft and soothing on the skin and they smell amazing.”

“We add in different clays from around the world for colouring and exfoliation and finally we add in essential and fragrance oils for scent,” concluded Tiina.

She is assisted in the business by her daughter Liisa, as well as Cianán Redmond, former marine and salesman. Both soaps and donkey milk powder to drink, are sold online.