

A little bit of Cleopatra with Leitrim's very own Donkey Milk Soap



Tiina's daughter Liisa of 12 Quail Farm

By **Leitrim Observer** reporter

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A native of Estonia, Tiina Laas arrived in Leitrim 20 years ago to work in the Bank of America in Carrick-on-Shannon. After being made redundant in 2008 and reluctant to leave Leitrim, a county she had fallen in love with, she began running a quail farm on her one acre holding in Foxfield.

Tiina had been told about the health benefits of quails' eggs when she suffered a severe bout of frozen shoulder, and initially bought 12 of the birds for her own use.

Tiina soon expanded the flock on "12 Quail Farm" and was soon selling to shops and high end restaurants throughout the region.

Tiina supplemented her business by turning her hobby of making handcrafted soaps at her kitchen table in to a business.

Using donkey milk as the main ingredient she started selling the soaps at local farmers' markets, creating the soaps in a variety of shapes and colours.

Her daughter Liisa Keranen, an IT professional, joined the team which now also includes marketing manager Cianán Redmond.

Donkey milk is regularly recognised for its medicinal properties with people like Cleopatra and Pope Francis cited as fans.

The anti-bacterial qualities of the raw material and a global preoccupation with hand washing helped this Leitrim-based company survive at a time when Covid 19- inspired lockdowns could have spelled disaster.

While the soap was being sold in to about 70 shops across Ireland, the UK, the US, Canada and mainland Europe, the pandemic meant that these retail outlets had temporarily closed but the business switched to online sales, which they successfully achieved with assistance from the Trading Online Voucher from the Local Enterprise Office.

“ We were lucky when Covid hit that we already had our online store operational so we were able to hit the ground running when retailers closed in March 2020, but this voucher helped us fine-tune our website and ultimately win new customers,” said Cianán.

And post pandemic, the company will be ready to bounce back to more traditional markets.

Cianán Redmond has been busy, investigating opportunities in China, Europe and North America and has made contact with a distributor with access to 5,000 retail stores in China.

One question the team is often asked is 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,” explained Tiina referring to the legend that Cleopatra bathed daily in donkey’s milk because of its rejuvenating qualities.

Cianán attributes their achievements and success to the supports provided by the Local Enterprise Office outlining “being listed as finalist in the 2020 National Enterprise Awards for Leitrim as well as participating in the three month Northwest Export Development Programme has helped us forge a pathway to expand our exports and the Local Enterprise Officer Mentoring Programme and other supports has provided practical solutions to handle the challenges that our business face”.

For further information on Donkey Soap

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