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Rougemont resident launches business making soap from goat milk

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The Herald-Sun | Christine T. Nguyen
 Todd Hinson of Red Mountain Goodness pours a goat milk soap mixture into a mold to cure on Thursday, October 18, 2012. Hinson started making goat milk soap for his wife, who suffered from dry skin, and turned soap-making into a business earlier this year.

BY LAURA OLENIACZ

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DURHAM – After 15 years of laboratory work, Todd Hinson has changed career directions, now making soap from goats' milk in his home kitchen in Rougemont in northern Durham County to be sold in stores in the state.

In his kitchen on Thursday, the 45-year-old donned a white chef's jacket and blue plastic gloves. He poured lye into a bowl containing another ingredient in the soap: cubes of frozen goat milk.

"This essentially is science," said Hinson, as he measured and mixed a combination of lye, milk, coconut oil, olive oil, and an to add peppermint fragrance that he eventually poured into a mold and placed in the refrigerator.

In the process, he used a magnetic mixing device to stir the lye and milk combination, and a graduated cylinder to pour in the fragrant oil.

Hinson said he previously worked for eight years in a lab at Duke University, and for seven at the private biotechnology firm Athenix Corp.

At Athenix, he said his work involved cloning and testing genes isolated from strains of bacteria. He also said his duties included supervision of the chemicals and solutions used. He said he worked at Athenix before the company was acquired by Bayer CropScience in 2009 for \$365 million.

Hinson said there are a lot of similarities between his lab work and what he does now. But he said he

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enjoys that his work through the Red Mountain Goodness business involves working with people.

He said he makes soap three days per week, and then the other two days and on weekends he's talking to customers and working with stores to try to get them to carry his product.

About 10 percent of his sales come from the Internet, while the rest are from sales in stores including Morgan Imports and Blue Diamond Spa in Durham.

"I'm more driven by doing this, or creating products that I see that directly help people," Hinson also said. "And I think I realized at some point that my work as a research scientist ... was not addressing that need that I felt like I had."

The idea to start Red Mountain Goodness was sparked following a Rougemont Ruritan Club meeting, Hinson said.

He said he heard Kathryn Spann, one of two owners of Prodigal Farm in Rougemont, speak. The farm produces chevre and other cheese from the milk of its goat herd.

"We started chatting, and then I got the idea of trying to make goat milk soap for (my) wife," Hinson said. His wife has dealt with dry skin in the winter. "Why my background as a scientist, it wasn't a trouble to get a recipe," he added.

Hinson now buys goat milk from Prodigal Farm for use in his soap. He buys about 40 gallons every three months for the business, he said, and makes about 300 bars of soap per week.

Spann said in an email that she doesn't know if she has any other arrangements like the one Prodigal Farm has with Hinson, "where he sort of exists because we had that milk conveniently available."

But she said restaurants in the area buy their cheeses and are part of an "interconnected and growing local food/farm system."

Hinson said at his own 1.5-acre property in Rougemont, he's trying to increasingly produce his own food and to source their meals with goods produced locally.

They have blueberry bushes in their yard that Hinson said generate about 10 gallons of berries per year.

They also have bees to make honey, they're growing shiitake mushrooms, and they have a vegetable garden, as well as 16 laying hens in a coup.

"Out of this 1.5 acres, with a certain amount of creativity, and efficiency of space, you can accomplish quite a bit – that's been our general challenge," he said.

Their production started growing after they set out to solve a problem one year when they realized they had flowers on their squash plants, but no squash.

Hinson said they asked around, and determined it was due to a pollination problem. He took a course in honey bee care, and added honey bees to what Hinson calls their "homestead."

They started producing their own honey, which he said was better than honey they'd purchased previously – and that led them to want to produce more of their own food.

"The sheer quality far surpasses what you get from a commercial store," he said.

Hinson said his connection with the club also sparked another initiative – a food pantry at his church, the Rougemont United Methodist Church, to serve people in the area. On Sept. 27, he said food was distributed from the pantry to 81 individuals who represented 162 family members.

"It really has grown dramatically with the number of people we have," he said.

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