

# VOGUE

*(The Bronner family in no way condones the 'VOGUE' lifestyle with its emphasis on high fashion, furs, makeup and many "starved looking, sour faced, overly made-up models."*

*However, we are proud that over two million readers, many of whom are not healthminded, got to read about our all natural soaps that are sold mainly in health food stores and a company that shares its' profit with its workers and Spaceship Earth!)*

# beauty

## soap salvation

A hit with hippies in the sixties, Dr. E. H. Bronner's weirdly packaged, all-purpose cleansers have been rediscovered by hipsters in the nineties. Robert Sullivan pays homage to the "pope of soap" and drops in on the heirs to the foam.



**BIZARRE BARS:** DR. BRONNER'S SOAPS HAVE WON A CULT FOLLOWING AS MUCH FOR THEIR KOOKY COPY AS FOR THEIR SYNTHETIC-FREE PURITY.

Volkswagen vans with it—to being hip with nineties hipsters, the fashionably antifashion soap selection that is as cool again today as it is cheap (about \$3 for eight long-lasting ounces).

I am able to report that Dr. Bronner's passing will not affect his enthusiastic patrons. I learned this the other day when I took a trip to Dr. Bronner's All-One-God-Faith Soap factory and talked to Dr. Bronner's sons and associates. They were sad about Dr. Bronner's departure, but they were carrying on with his soapmaking. They directed me to an excerpt from an article published in a soap newsletter that was read at Dr. Bronner's funeral. It said, "Dr. Bronner will leave this world a better place. He is an inspiration to soapcrafters everywhere."

Before I toured the soap factory, I was briefed on the amazing life of Dr. Bronner. He was born Emanuel Heilbronner in Germany in 1908 to a family of longtime soapmakers. In 1930, he moved to Milwaukee, where he began sending telegrams to world leaders in an effort to promote world peace and to end such things as Communism and fluoridation. To say Dr. Bronner was eccentric is being gentle, but his eccentricity was mistaken for illness and he was sentenced to a psychiatric hospital. He escaped twice and endeavored unsuccessfully to prove his sanity, but both times he was locked back up. When he escaped the third time, he fled to Los Angeles, where, as his sons like to say, he fit right in. There he began mixing his own concoctions in bathtubs in an old apartment building on Bunker Hill in downtown L.A. *beauty* ▶548

for those of you who have used Dr. Bronner's Peppermint 18-in-1 Pure-Castile Soap and have paused in the shower or the bath to ponder the existence of the Rabbi Dr. E. H. Bronner, SMMC (soapmaker and master chemist), and have assumed him to be nothing more than a figment of some marketing genius's imagination—the natural-beauty-product industry's version of Dr. Pepper, say, or as a kind of Ronald McDonald for the organic-soap set—know this: Dr. Bronner is real, as real, in fact, as the total-body tingle that results from bathing with Dr. Bronner's Peppermint 18-in-1 Pure-Castile Soap, the invigorating menthol Peppermint Pattie-esque sensation that hits this correspondent best at around six in the morning, post jog. At least he *was* real. He died in March at age 89, near the soap-company headquarters in Escondido, California, where he lived and formulated the word-filled, *Finnegans Wake*-ian labels that made him both famous and infamous and that made his soap a favorite of everyone from backpackers to motorcyclists to models. But he lived just long enough to see his soap go from being the all-purpose cleanser of sixties hippies—flower children washed everything from their hair to their teeth to their

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He used his family's ancient recipes, mixing the soaps and health tonics with broom handles. In his white coat, with a shock of thick dark hair and dark glasses (Dr. Bronner was blind for the last 25 years of his life), he had the look of a mad soap scientist, occasionally offering customers the beauty advice he himself lived and bathed by for almost nine decades: "Dilute! Dilute! Dilute!"

He composed multithousand-word tracts and pasted them on his soap bottles; he wove together the words of people like Jesus Christ, Karl Marx, Thomas Paine, Mark Spitz, and Oprah Winfrey, among many, many others. An excerpt: "For centuries man struggles half asleep, half living, small & jealous, bickering with mountains of red tape to be awakened, the night God chose giving His great reward for hard work: Poetry, uniting Love, evolving man above the ape!" Both the all-natural soap and the All-One label went over big in places like the Haight-Ashbury District in San Francisco, and subsequently in health-food stores across the nation. Some of Dr. Bronner's admirers even made pilgrimages to his Escondido home, where they ended up staying and bottling soap—the self-proclaimed doctor was all for peace and love but not for lying around ("Work! Work!" he would bark). Dr. Bronner was the original Ben & Jerry in that he gave money to the homeless, sponsored a rain forest, built a drinking well in Ghana, and, on behalf of his profit-sharing employees, planted trees around the factory property in their names.

Dr. Bronner never advertised, but today, his All-One Soap sells about one-and-a-half-million bottles a year, mostly in health-food stores. And though big not-so-natural companies have made offers for the Dr. Bronner All-One name, the company has remained small, resisting developing a more extensive line of beauty products and concentrating on high-quality soaps.

"We get calls from people all the time who don't believe that there are only two ingredients, but it's true," says Dr. Bronner's son Jim, leading the All-One factory tour. Inside, aisles of bland cardboard boxes are marked by the trademark blue, green, and purple All-One labels—and by the invisible but great-smelling clouds of corresponding peppermint, almond, and lavender scents. The two ingredients are a synthetic-free potassium solution and oils. In the case of the peppermint soap, the oils are coconut, olive, jo-

## Dr. Bronner's tracts weave together the words of people like Jesus Christ, Karl Marx, Thomas Paine, Mark Spitz, and Oprah Winfrey

joba, and peppermint. The peppermint is notably fine and pure and comes from the Yakima Valley in Washington State. The soap is mixed in secret in an unmarked location in Los Angeles—I was not allowed to go there. It is trucked down to Escondido in giant silver milk trucks and siphoned into four white plumbing pipes. Each bottle is filled by hand, way up to the top. The soap is beautifully clear when dropped into water, as opposed to other soaps and shampoos that can cloud, and it is so concentrated in the bottle that it teeters on the brink of solidity. "It doesn't strip everything off your skin," says Jim Bronner.



ON A SOAPBOX: THE LABEL ON DR. BRONNER'S LAVENDER 18-IN-1 PURE-CASTILE SOAP, LEFT, IS A MINI MANIFESTO ON TOPICS RANGING FROM OVERPOPULATION TO POETRY. IT REQUIRES GOOD EYES AND AN AWFULLY LONG SHOWER TO DECODE.

Jim\* and Ralph, the two Bronner sons left running the company, couldn't be more unlike each other. Jim is the president of Dr. Bronner's and in charge of the business side; he's an inventor, like his father, though unlike his father he didn't have much time for the Moral ABCs, and when his father began ranting on about them he tended to walk away or hang up the phone. Ralph, the company's

The tumult and the shouting dies;  
The captains and the kings depart;  
Still stands your ancient sacrifice,  
A humble and courageous heart.  
Lord God of nations, unite us yet,  
By thy law, the Moral ABC of the free  
Lest we forget, lest we forget!

vice president, is a folksinger by temperament who spent summers typing All-One sermons onto labels. He taught school in Milwaukee for many years, but today he travels the country in a Dr. Bronner's All-One van passing out the soap and spreading the not-always-comprehensible word.

As a soap-company team, the two brothers are very, well, All-One. But taken separately, the two brothers are like a left-brain/right-brain experience, a fact indicated by their personal Dr. Bronner's Soap preferences.

"I like Lavender," Ralph says. "I don't know what it is about it, although about ten years ago I learned that lavender is actually part of the peppermint family."

"For me, it's Peppermint," Jim says. "You always come back to Peppermint. You see, peppermint is 50 percent menthol, and the menthol—I'm learning this from aromatherapy—reacts with your nerve endings. It makes you feel cool. We traditionally sell more in the summer, in fact. But Ralph likes Lavender. He sends everybody Lavender, and I don't understand it. But then, Ralph and I disagree on a lot of things. We're very different. Although the other day one of Dad's old friends was saying that when Ralph and I are both in a room together, the two of us together are so much like Dad. I suppose that's probably right." □ *vogue beauty* ▶550

\* ( Jim Bronner passed away in June of 1998. His oldest son David is doing a remarkable job as president, along with his mother Trudy CEO and Ralph Bronner)

Dr. Bronner's soaps have also had wonderful articles or raves in SEVENTEEN, YM, AMERICAN HEALTH, GQ, BACKPACKER, MONEY, GLAMOUR, SASSY, CALIFORNIA, ALLURE, THE SAN DIEGO UNION, COSMOPOLITAN, MIRABELLA, ORION, OUTDOOR GEAR, THE LOS ANGELES TIMES, DIRT RIDER, THE WALLSTREET JOURNAL, SHAPE, ESQUIRE, NATURAL HEALTH, PARENTING and others, including books that rate products for environmental safety. With articles like these and word-of-mouth promotion, we use the money saved on advertising and marketing for the finest quality ingredients, great benefits for our employees and projects that help Spaceship Earth and it's people!

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