

of the earth

AN OLIVE GROVE AND A GOAT NAMED SNOW WHITE PROVIDED THE INSPIRATION FOR SKINCARE RANGE BARE NATURE'SKIN.

WORDS SUE RAMSEY PHOTOGRAPHY BRIGID ARNOTT



Lemon myrtle, dried lemons, rosella flowers and Australian rock salt are ingredients in Michelle's handmade bath salts. **FACING PAGE** Goats provide soothing milk for her Bare Nature'sKin soaps.

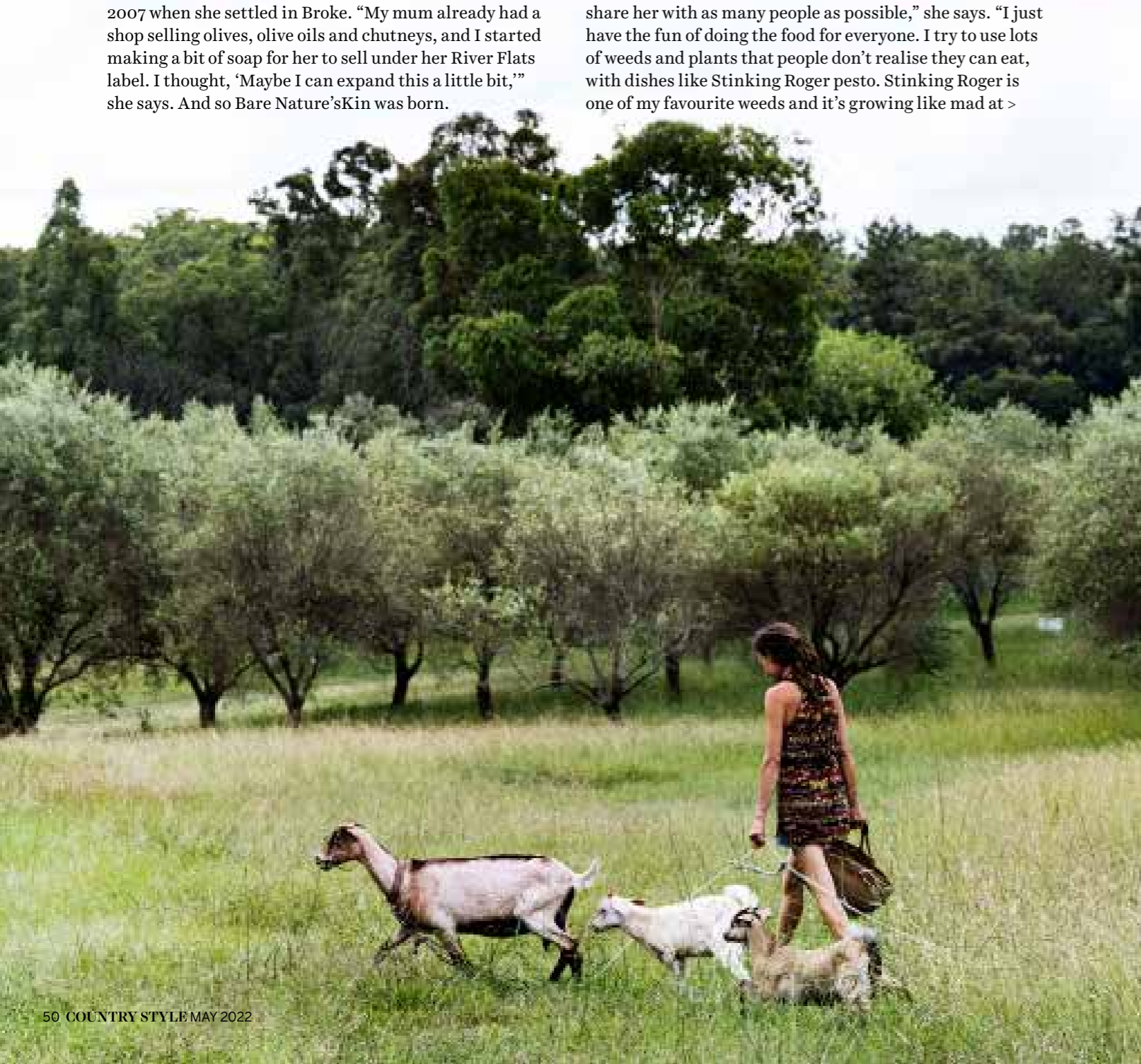
MOVING TO A FAMILY FARM WITH a thriving olive grove in the Hunter Valley, New South Wales, was the beginning of a journey that led to a successful handmade soap and skincare business for former Sydneysider Michelle Waite. The land, in rural Broke, had been in the family for over 40 years, and was used as a much-loved holiday spot.

“It was just an empty property,” says Michelle, who’d been working as a home-care nurse in Sydney. “We’d come up here as children and camp and swim down at the river. Then when my mum moved up here 25 years ago, she and my brother Andrew planted the olive grove – it was one of the first in the Hunter Valley.”

Having access to olive oil as an ingredient was in part what prompted Michelle to begin soapmaking back in 2007 when she settled in Broke. “My mum already had a shop selling olives, olive oils and chutneys, and I started making a bit of soap for her to sell under her River Flats label. I thought, ‘Maybe I can expand this a little bit,’” she says. And so Bare Nature’sKin was born.

Local herbalist Pat Collins also provided inspiration and knowledge for the natural skincare products Michelle now creates. “When I first came up here, I had a friend who’d done one of Pat’s workshops and she said, ‘You’d love this – I’m going to take you along,’” Michelle, 42, explains. At the workshop, she learnt the basic elements of making creams, ointments and tinctures. “Once you know about that, it’s up to you to apply whatever weeds and herbs to get the medicinal value from that herb into your product,” says Michelle, whose range incorporates organic herbs, flowers, fruit and seeds she’s grown and harvested herself.

Wanting to share Pat’s amazing knowledge, Michelle now hosts some of her herbal medicine workshops at River Flats Estate. “Pat has so much information that I love to share her with as many people as possible,” she says. “I just have the fun of doing the food for everyone. I try to use lots of weeds and plants that people don’t realise they can eat, with dishes like Stinking Roger pesto. Stinking Roger is one of my favourite weeds and it’s growing like mad at >



CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT Michelle and Marian’s store at River Flats Estate is brimming with beautiful, handcrafted goodies, from nourishing soaps and skincare products to delicious chutneys and olive oils; Michelle has six goats, but is currently only milking Sophie; loofahs are a great natural exfoliant; Michelle and Millie climb what family and friends call the ‘rainbow tree’, due to its big arch; shopping at the River Flats store is a sensory treat; a crepe myrtle frames the shop’s entrance; stinging nettles are included in Michelle’s hemp shampoo as they offer benefits for circulation and healthy hair growth; harvesting Stinking Roger, a powerful insect repellent. **FACING PAGE** Faithful goats make cute companions.



PEOPLE BROKE NSW

Michelle adores her spirited goats. **FACING PAGE** Two of the happy herd at play.

“The fat in goat’s milk is an extra moisturising component... it’s beneficial for people with eczema, psoriasis or dermatitis.”





CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT Lemons are zested and sliced before drying them in the sun; faithful companion Magnus; Michelle enjoys the serene views as she creates one of her popular bath salts; the goat milking shed is affectionately known as the 'Milk Bar'; olive oil soap is rolled in calendula, tea tree and lavender; adorable, noisy piglets provide daily entertainment; the handmade Bare Nature'sKin soaps include longer 'strips' that customers can cut into smaller lengths; loyal Magnus is always at Michelle's side, taking a nap while she works. **FACING PAGE** Sheep graze and roam around the picturesque property.



the moment. It's good for warding off insects, too, so I infuse it in oil and include it in a herbal insect repellent cream."

About five years ago, the Bare Nature'sKin range expanded further when Michelle was gifted a goat. "Friends out at Pilliga had a milking goat that they didn't need to milk anymore, so they offered it to me, and I said, 'Absolutely!' Snow White was my first milking goat and it's just been never-ending since then. I've got six goats now, but I'm only milking Soph at the moment. There are a few over at a friend's place – just doing the lawnmowing."

There's a very good reason Michelle uses their milk in her skincare range. "Goat's milk is unreal!" she says. "It's an amazing product to have access to. I'm getting almost two litres a day from Soph, and for the soapmaking I freeze it first and, instead of using water in the soap, I use the milk. The fat in it is an extra moisturising component that other soaps don't have, and that's really beneficial for people with eczema, psoriasis or dermatitis."

Now, Michelle sells her cold-processed soaps and a raft of other handmade natural products online and through local general stores and boutique outlets, as well as from the shop she and her mum, Marian, share on the property. "The shop is something we built a few years back in the middle of the olive grove," Michelle explains. "There's a little patch where we've nestled the shop in among the trees. And there's a little animal area off to the side with the pigs and a couple of goats. So if I'm milking the goats, people can come and help me or they can watch."

Aside from her Bare Nature'sKin business, Michelle helps pick all the table olives on the farm, as well as

working with Marian to create her delicious chutneys and pickles. In the past they've had help from WWOOFers (Willing Workers on Organic Farms), but it's just the two of them living there at present.

There is, however, a growing tribe of animals on the property. "I'm a bit of an animal refuge and everyone that has an animal that they're looking for a home for gives me a ring and says, 'Do you want to take them on?'" Michelle says. "I say yes – I can't say no! As well as the goats, we've got a few alpacas, some sheep, chickens, geese, guinea fowl and several pigs. I've got two sows and they've got 20 piglets between them at the moment – they're very entertaining."

And never far from Michelle's side is her beloved dog, Magnus. "He's my soulmate," she says. "He's a rescue dog, so I don't know specifically what breed he is, but he's a beautiful mate – he goes everywhere with me."

Looking to the future, Michelle says she'll continue hosting the herbal workshops and will likely expand her product range with different types of soaps and creams. Inspiration has come from a variety of sources, such as the Huon pine shavings used as 'bubble wrap' to pack some crystals she'd bought on a visit to Tasmania. "The shavings are great as an exfoliant, so I made a soap with them and added some leatherwood honey," she says. "It's good to have something fresh and new coming up." *Michelle and Marian's shop at 500 Wollombi Rd, Broke, is open Thurs-Sun, 10am-5pm, or by appointment. For more, visit barenatureskin.com.au or riverflatsestate.com.au, or follow @barenatureskin on Instagram.*

