

# MARIN

EXTRAORDINARY LIVING

MADE IN MARIN



## CLEAN LIVING

Corte Madera's EO products are good for the body and the soul

Living luxuriously does not necessarily mean compromising your values. EO Products (EO for Essential Oils) in Corte Madera attests to that. The all-natural beauty-product and cosmetics manufacturer is as committed to preserving the earth as it is to ensuring your skin feels baby soft. Susan and Brad Black started the company 14 years ago in their garage. Today, EO Products employs more than 30 people and sells 100-plus products for the body and the home that bring in more than \$7 million a year in revenue. But EO is still a family venture through and through. We caught up with Susan and Brad Black to learn more.

BY SAMANTHA BERRY PHOTOS BARBARA RIES



**How did EO get its start?** We haven't always wanted to manufacture all our own products; however, the only way to have control over the quality of ingredients and formulations and to ensure that the products are truly natural was to do so. Our company started in 1992 importing and distributing a small line of aromatherapy products from the United Kingdom. As the market for natural products grew, we received lots of calls [asking us] to make private-label products for other companies. At the same time, our U.K. distribution relationship became difficult and started to affect our cash flow. We had two choices: stop and do something else, or transition into a different company.

In hindsight, we should have bankrupted the business. However, our commitment to our original investors (mostly family and friends) kept us going. We studied aromatherapy and figured out how to go from hand-pouring massage oils from beakers into bottles to "production" on a larger scale.

Soon we were making products for companies like Birkenstock and Rockport. We started with foot balm, salve and spray that I think Birkenstock gave away as freebies.

In 1995, we did a private-label project making aromatherapeutic blends for Bloomingdale's. We called it EO. After that, we created the first line of EO Products and sold it to the same stores—mostly gift shops—that had carried the products from the U.K.

It didn't take long to discover that we wanted to sell our products in a market that was more conscious about the ingredients and sustainable business practices and less concerned with having a new product every five minutes. In 1997, we finally got on the shelves in Whole Foods in Mill Valley. In late 1999, we bought a private-label manufacturing facility in Corte Madera so that we could broaden our manufacturing capabilities and product offerings.

**What was the original vision for EO?** The original EO vision—which still stands—was to make high-quality, essential-oil-based personal care products that were simple, fresh and clean, using as many local, organic and plant-based ingredients as possible.

We also saw business as a means to practice right livelihood and the way to have an integrated life—blending our beliefs with our business. We wanted to make clean products that we would use. Establishing a triple bottom line of profitability, social consciousness, and environmental responsibility was the only way.

**Where did you start the company?** In our garage in Potrero Hill on Connecticut Street in San Francisco. After a few years we moved to the "red light" district of Marin, next to where Paradise Market currently stands. We were desperately looking for a Marin location because that's where we chose to live. We could only afford a unit in [what was then a] run-down shopping center with a "massage parlor" next door. We had 2,800 square feet and seven employees. After a few years, they decided to tear down the shopping center. We begged a private-label manufacturer in Corte Madera to please consider selling her 15,000-square-foot operation to us. Eventually she sold us the plant and we moved to that location.

**Why Marin?** Marin is one of the most beautiful places in the world. It is like living on vacation. We had been coming out here for years to go to [the Zen Center's] Green Gulch Farm or to go mountain biking on Mount Tam. What better place is there to live and work?

**What was the first product you sold?** Lip balm. It was easy to make and we could ensure great natural and local ingredients. At first we needed products that were "cold mixed" and had no emulsifiers. Neither of us is a chemist, but what we could do well was blend essential oils. You have to start with the easy things.

**How do you decide what to make next?** Our products follow our lives. We recently came out with the first organic and non-GMO hand sanitizer. Organic alcohol is a huge breakthrough but it wasn't easy to figure out how to combine it with other natural ingredients. Once you decide to make something and start down the path it is a real voyage of discovery.

**What's your best-selling product?** French lavender hand soap and the hand sanitizer are tied for first place right now.

**Does EO have a company philosophy?** Love life. Live clean. We have been dedicated to making wholesome products in a way that embraces organic agriculture, sustainability and right livelihood. How we work together as a company and within the community locally and globally is a learning process that we attend to with great care and commitment. We've managed so far to stay independent, financing the business ourselves with credit cards, family, friends, banks and angels—anything to stay autonomous so that we do what we do with quality and passion.

**How do your products reflect that philosophy?** You can smell and feel our commitment in every product that we make. It's like cooking—when you use fresh, high-quality ingredients you can tell the difference. Our philosophy also shows up in our very minimal use of postconsumer packaging and the fact that we choose raw materials that are organic or wild crafted.

**EO is certified green business and certified organic. Why is this important to you?** It's who we are, what we believe in and what we do. There's no other way.

**What does it mean to be a family company in the world of mega-chains?** We are beholden to our customers, employees, family, friends, angels and banks rather than to marketing concepts geared toward building sales so the company can be sold. Whole Foods is our principal trading partner and we get great support from them because we are the stewards of quality and are aligned with our customers.

**If you were stuck on a desert island, what one product would you have with you?** EO Hand Cream because we'd be digging a hole to China.