

Feature 

Our Favourite Soapie

Rather than working herself into lather after being made redundant, Carolyn Imlach (pictured) took herself to the State Library to study traditional soap-making. She began selling her wares at markets, and now sells them throughout Australia and the world – even to an Alaskan woman named Sunshine who bathes outdoors. The soaps are still all made in a tiny workroom behind what might be the cutest store in Melbourne, **Est** (134 Auburn Rd, Hawthorn East).

Park up in Auburn village and let the heavenly scent of soaps coax you to Carolyn's door. There you'll be greeted with a jumble of gorgeous handcrafted items ranging from a large and exquisitely ornate birdcage, made by a Hungarian woodworker living in Melbourne, to string bags knitted by a Tasmanian woman who lives in a caravan.

A refugee from the corporate world of fashion, Carolyn never liked the idea of ripping off and replicating samples bought around the world. "I wanted to do something unique and this store is a reflection of the things I love," she says, opening up while determinedly clutching a cuddly knitted possum close to her chest. "I'd love to be able to do all these crafts myself, but I can't, so I try and help people do what I can't."

She's reluctant to even let us see the knitted possum, afraid we might actually want to buy it. "Sometimes I just can't part with things in the store," she laughs. "I just put them in the back for a while and then they make their way upstairs to the top floor where I live."

The shop has so much to choose from that home must be quite the jumble. There are hand-worked natural linen cloths, velvet books made from regenerative bushes in India, stunning ceramics made exclusively by a local potter, blackboards shaped like farm animals, scented candles from her friend and so on and on that you'd think you were in a much bigger shop.

The birdcage in the window had just been, reluctantly, put on display after keeping Carolyn company upstairs for more than three months. And even now, she's not quite ready to part with it. "We're taking names of people who want to buy the birdcage but I want it to stay in the store for a few months so people can enjoy it, be inspired by it." That's her most enduring philosophy; that people should enjoy crafting the works as well as seeing them and, ultimately perhaps, making the purchase.

She doesn't make demands of her suppliers because they do what they do for love, not to fill orders. And, like in the case of the birdcage, she sometimes passes on her slow philosophy to customers, who never seem to mind. Patient shopping; what a quaint idea! She has also remained true to her weekend market origins, still carting her soaps to far-flung communities who should not all of a sudden be expected to come to her, she says.

But soap is still her main product, and she personally hand-rolls most of the 40,000 balls she sells each year. They're all made



in the tiny light-filled workroom behind the shop that feels like a postcard from 19th century France. Molly the Maltese-cross sits on a cushion enviously eyeing off the big bowl of lemon, lime and poppy-seed soap that has prime position drying in front of the open fire. “You can speed the process of soap-making by

cooking it,” says Carolyn, “but we don’t. We like the traditional method. When it sets, the process starts and I have to get rolling. That’s why sometimes I’m up in the middle of the night rolling soap. But I love it.” Trust us, you will too. But don’t count on getting anywhere near the possum.