

The Druze soap star Hollywood loves

By Karin Kloosterman
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A Druze grandma from northern Israel has created a soap empire that has attained celebrity status, used by the likes of Justin Timberlake, Rihanna and Angelina Jolie.



Feminist and path breaker, Gamila Hiar uses local herbs grown in the Galilee to produce her famous soaps.

When Israeli supermodel [Bar Rafaeli](#) comes to Israel for a visit, she makes sure to stock up on [Gamila's soaps](#) for her glamorous friends around the world. She and other celebrities like Justin Timberlake, Rihanna and Angelina Jolie swear by the stuff, according to Fuad Hiar, the eldest son of Israel's most lucrative soap maker the 70-year-old Gamila Hiar.

Gamila is adept at the role of traditional soap maker. She's traditionally dressed, and as one would expect from an iconic grandmother figure, she has inherited her family's ancient "soap wisdom" from prior generations, using recipes from her grandfathers, and herbs from their gardens around the Galilee village of Peki'in.

For more than 40 years now, Gamila has been making and selling soap - concocted into small bars worth their weight in gold - at about \$35 each. Called Gamila's Secret, about 100,000 of them are shipped every month to 23 countries around the world.

The secrets aren't in the choice of oils Gamila publicizes widely: Olive, almond, avocado and lavender. They are in the 15 secret herbs and plant extracts native to the Galilee that give the soap its special restorative properties.

Soaps and sex

Gamila (pronounced jah-mill-ah) was born and raised in a small Druze village in Israel, where she still lives today. Her son Fuad, who runs the company, lives in another Druze village nearby.

Considered an outgrowth of Islam, the secret Druze sect in Israel has a special history and relationship with the holy land. A tenet of the Druze belief is support of the country of residence, and its adherents are famously known for their service in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), unlike Israeli Arabs who do not enlist.

Gamila has an extra-special relationship to her village. She was the first woman to enter the workforce decades ago, and is seen as something of a feminist since she introduced sex education into the local schools and emphasizes the importance of subjects such as math. She is also known for her support of women's employment in her traditional society.



Gamila Soap is now on sale in 23 countries around the world.

Today, other than two of her sons, the soap factory in the Tefen Industrial Park employs only women - from the Druze, Jewish, Christian and Muslim faiths.

But the family wasn't always busy shipping out thousands of soap bars each month. In the beginning says Fuad (52), who has turned Gamila Secret into an international brand, they used to give the soap away.

Giving it away

While in the army, at a cadet's college in Haifa, he'd bring samples to his army mates - and any friends he could get to try it. The soap, he brags to ISRAEL21c, wasn't tested on animals but on his army buddies, some of whom could get quite dirty.

"It's really 40 years of development," says Fuad, himself a path breaker in his community. The first Druze to graduate from the Hebrew Reali School in Haifa's Carmel mountains, he went on to serve in one of the IDF's most prestigious army units as an officer in the Golani Brigade, where he stayed for seven years. Today he runs the global soap business.

Today, there are problems keeping Gamila Secret soap in stock, with orders backlogged by six months. Like a fine wine, the soap requires a certain amount of waiting time. It doesn't ferment. Rather the plant-based oils and ingredients require setting time -- months of drying until they harden.

With no artificial colors or fragrances involved, the soaps are gentle enough for babies, and boast restorative qualities that fight aging and skin diseases like eczema. Because they contain no animal derivatives, the soap is also perfect for vegans, and those looking for kosher and halal products.

Make your skin smile

The high cost per bar is because the soap is produced with edible oils.

With family memories spanning generations, Gamila today has five children (four boys and a girl,) 15 grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. While she isn't familiar with the celebrities who use her products, she tells ISRAEL21c that she knows their endorsement is very important for business.

Over the past few years she has developed a face oil and cream. "It's something good, without chemicals. All natural with no preservatives," says Gamila who sees her fortune as her children, the four sons who are continuing her business: "I have luck with my children. They love the work, and believe in it and continue my work. My first child was born into the soap and he and his brothers continue," she tells ISRAEL21c.

Her best marketing tactic is the product itself and the one slogan she continues to use to promote the soap: "Try it and your skin will smile."
