

# SUCCESS *Smells* SWEET

Melissa Farris turned a love of oils and herbal remedies into a million-dollar business before burning out. Now she's back. By Nancy Sartor



To characterize Melissa Farris as a zealous herbal practitioner is like calling Prince a pretty good guitarist. Farris, 34, is a certified herbalist and aromatherapist who started her own international business—distributing high quality essential oils and bulk herbal extracts—at 24. The company was called Simplers Botanicals LLC and idealism was its driving force.

Farris, a Bloomington native, was so passionate about her work, and so driven to educate people on the benefits of medicinal aromatherapy and herbalism, that her 20s vanished in a sweet-smelling haze. While many of her peers were in college dorms experimenting with cannabis sativa, Farris was meeting with organic lavender farmers in the French countryside, building relationships that would distinguish her from competitors in the botanicals market.

"In France, medical herbalism and aromatherapy are offered in pharmacies and are regulated for quality control," she explains. Upon her return to the states, she studied herbalism, taking classes in chemistry, anatomy, physiology, pharmacology and botany.

In 1996 Farris founded Simplers and began supplying organic, therapeutic-grade essential oils and bulk tinctures (concentrated herbal extracts made with alcohol) to markets in northern California. The company was an immediate success. "I was the first person to offer bulk herbal extracts and pharmaceutical-grade organic essential oils to the health food stores, and was the first to offer consumers a guide to using these oils medicinally. The idea was to make pharmaceutical-grade tinctures using organic herbs—but not endangered species—and to provide usage information and contraindications," she says. "At the time, nobody was do-

ing it, and the bulk tinctures just took off. Within one month I had 10 stores and was teaching every day."

Her first clients were local co-ops and vendors, but within a couple of months, Whole Foods and Wild Oats, two organic-minded national chains, signed on to carry the line. Even Hollywood came calling. "I am known in the herbal scene in California," Farris modestly admits. "For years I sold kava and valerian tinctures to the Red Hot Chili Peppers... Madonna also bought our products."

*"Every family should have a bottle of peppermint, lavender and tea tree in their home pharmacy—they pretty much take care of everything."*

—Melissa Farris

Farris' mission, though, is to inform the larger public about the true advantages of her trade. She is quick to explain the vast difference between therapeutic-grade essential oils used for medicinal purposes, and synthetic or adulterated essential oils used commercially by the food and fragrance industry.

"I have to educate people, because the whole concept of 'aromatherapy' has been so bastardized in America," she says. "It's just a crime. The first time I saw purple-colored 'aromatherapy, anti-stress dishwashing liquid' for \$1.99, I started crying. It's just overwhelming what kind of crap is out there, and when you have to demystify this whole industry, it's a huge responsibility."

But as the business grew, so did the responsibility and Farris found she was

stretched too thin. Six years after its inception, Simplers was grossing nearly \$1 million. Farris was successful, but burned out. "I was such a kid when I started Simplers," she says. "I didn't know anything about the business side of things. I traveled all around the United States, and did all of the product development, sales and education by myself. We were in close to 450 stores. My father, who was also an entrepreneur and my mentor, said, 'You're in way over your head; you can't continue to operate like this—you either have to give up some control or let it go.' So I sold the business and came back to my roots."

After selling Simplers, and returning to Minnesota, Farris continued to work and share her passion for herbalism. In 2002 she launched a new company, Veriditas Botanicals LLC, to sell bulk-sized (one-ounce bottles instead of the usual 5 mL) pharmaceutical-grade essential oils. Using the same fair-trade distilleries and building new clients means she still travels a lot—throughout the U.S., to Europe and most recently to Japan—but this time around, Farris is mindful of balancing her personal life with her business. She's a practicing Catholic and yogi, and makes time for family, friends and outdoor activities, such as hiking. "Being with plants is a really important thing for me," she says. "There is something very magical about being with plants in their natural environment." +

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Veriditas Botanicals oils can be found at Lakewinds co-ops, Mississippi Market, the Yoga Center of Minneapolis, the Wedge and Tao Natural Foods. For more information about how to use essential oils, visit [veriditasbotanicals.com](http://veriditasbotanicals.com).

During a recent trip to France, herbalist Melissa Farris snapped photos of the provincial countryside, including lavender fields and distilleries.

