



The Way We  
Live in

# CLA

*Los Olivos*



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**Mike Eliason**



# Loving Lavender

This family looks forward to fields of fragrant flowers every summer.

By Meryl Ann Tanz, LOS OLIVOS, CALIFORNIA

I am delighted to be writing a daily diary. I have often wondered what we do every day to arrive in bed a bit exhausted each night.

Clairmont Farms is a small organic family farm, and lavender is our breadwinner. This winter bush, gray in color and resembling a New Mexican sagebrush, doesn't look remarkable, but it has a history of helping millions of people over thousands of years.

The name comes from the Latin *lavare*, which means to wash.

Lavender was used to scent baths and wash body and soul. The Roman army used lavender oil to treat wounds, cuts, sunburns, stomach maladies and other ailments.

Did I think of all this when I plowed these acres 10 years ago? Not really. All I knew was that I had to make a living with that field.

For many years, I raised thoroughbreds for racing. I had many successes and, of course, failures. Horses are like delicate flowers, and I found a lifelong love of them and a desire to keep them safe. I left the thoroughbred business but kept the farm.

After a few years, I planted five acres of grosso lavender. It became a passion, and I personally nurtured about 12,000 plants.

After three years, the blooms came and we started producing oils and mists. A lot of research on the Internet and in books eventually led to a line of lavender products.

My husband, Glenn, develops our products, which range from fairly

simple body lotion to candles. People know we make it all here and are satisfied with the quality.

Our son, Sean, helps sell our products to customers. He attends a community college and wants to become a teacher.

Our store is a small building with a large table filled with our products. Our Web site, [clairmontfarms.com](http://clairmontfarms.com), includes a photo tour of our place, directions for getting here, information about lavender and a page for ordering our products.

We're fortunate that the Santa Ynez Valley has become an international center for agricultural tourism. We have customers who come here from all over the world and have become a part of the experience that people look for when they come to the valley.

Here is the story of how Glenn, Sean and I, with the help of our faithful and dedicated worker, Marcos, handle the lavender harvest.

**n JUNE 1**—Monday. I woke to the hens outside the French doors. Glenn spoiled me and brought the paper and a steaming cup of coffee. We sat and talked about what to do that day.

The field beckoned: bright pea-green, soft six-inch heads in the thousands. All they need to thrive is an irrigation system that ensures each plant receives its proper allotment of water from Lake Cachuma.

Half an hour for lunch, and we are grateful for the cloudy skies. Dinner is simple and sleep divine.

**n JUNE 2**—Tuesday. Glenn rose ear-

Glenn Thalheimer, Meryl and their son, Sean (top right) grow fields of lavender at Clairmont Farms. Continuing clockwise: distilling lavender oil; Glenn and Tweety; people come for miles to buy bundles of lavender fresh-cut from the field.



Los Olivos

Clairmont Farms is in Santa Barbara County, California, which...

- **HAS** a mild climate that supports a massive and diverse fresh fruit and vegetable market generating \$1 billion annually.
- **GROWS** strawberries, broccoli and grapes.
- **PRODUCES** cattle.
- **GETS** 21 inches of precipitation a year.
- **AVERAGES** June temperatures between 50 and 86 degrees.

The Golden State

ly to distill oil today. Several orders came through our Web site last night, and he needed the oil for hand and body lotion. We keep 500 boxes of dried, loose lavender in the barn.

Two were retrieved and taken to our distiller. We filled the cylinder with over 50 pounds of buds. Our distiller is a 20-liter alembic unit made in Portugal especially for distilling essential oils. The process of extraction is basically to steam the buds and then condense the vapor. As the steam vaporizes the oil, the condensate contains both water and oil.

## I saw the sight I look forward to each year— purple fields and purple hay swaying in the breeze.

Opening time, 10.a.m., came quickly, and I opened the old horse gate and put up signs. I saw mama deer with babies resting under the oaks. I thanked God for our life.

Marcos was here to help, so we finished the nitrogen feed. We've tried to stop the gophers from entering our vegetable garden. Three asparagus and one dill are missing.

Sean served customers. People who like lavender are generous with their smiles and purses.

**n JUNE 3**—Wednesday. Another cloudy day. Glenn went to Los Angeles. Sean and I opened the shop, and I decided a deep clean was in order.

People have begun calling and asking when the field will be in full bloom. Our guess is in two weeks.

We got some more orders on the Web. Hooray! Glenn is steadfast about orders leaving within a day of receipt.

The horseshoer arrived to trim the horses' hooves. I have two beautiful fillies left on the farm and want to find them good homes. It hurts to see them doing nothing.

**n JUNE 4**—Thursday. Today we

searched for eggs. The hens tend to move to secret locations every now and then, though they have comfy lay boxes. Sometimes they are too far away, and I think it's a case of when you gotta go, you gotta go. We have two hens sitting on eggs that we're not quite sure have been fertilized.

The weather suddenly turned cool, and it looked like November. I was grateful—any day that is cooler is a delight.

We put shade cloths over the tomatoes, spinach and eggplant. They are thriving. Gophers continue their reign. Though we are vigilant, they

still manage to eat the artichokes.

Sean and I are trying to shed pounds, so we walked around the neighboring farm.

**n JUNE 5**—Friday. The Los Olivos Jazz and Olive Festival is this weekend. The streets are crowded, but we had very few visitors today. Friday has usually been a busy day. Maybe we're getting spoiled?

Today we set out to weed the empty horse paddocks. We plan to take down the fences this fall and

perhaps plant more fruit trees. The paddocks encompass almost two acres of soil. We will have to till the land, though. The horses have tamped it down over the years.

I watered the new plants at the front gates and looked over the fields as I watered. The tops of thousands of stems were a bright purple. The wind blew, and I saw the sight I look forward to each year—purple fields and purple hay swaying in the breeze.

**n JUNE 6**—Saturday. Today we discovered Vera's babies. Vera is a Spitzhauben German hen who went broody and hatched two tiny black chicks with white spots on their heads. We took them to the house and placed them on clean mulch in a big cardboard box. She makes new noises, and we see the chicks hiding under her skirts.

Today Glenn made soap, which we bagged and put in the store. We buy new plants from the nursery as a courtesy to customers who want them. A greenhouse is on the agenda: We will buy starter plants and grow them for sale. I have always wanted a greenhouse like the large ones made of metal found in palace gardens.

I watched the French Open. I love Roger Federer. He won! Tomorrow I will make bags of three sizes.

**n JUNE 7**—Sunday. The valley was quiet, and the doves cooed.

Bees buzzing among the lavender plants are a common sight.



Glenn and Meryl cut bunches of lavender and wrap them for sale.



Turtledoves have come back to the farm. I grew up in South Africa, and the sound links me to our little house in Bergvliet, a suburb of Cape Town. **n JUNE 8**—Monday. My daughter Caroline's birthday is today. We began a new project—a home for Vera and her babies. We retrieved wire and wood from the back of the barn, and after some hammering we put the birds in their new digs.

Today crows chased a mother duck and 11 ducklings out of the lavender field and into the pool. What a sight! Glenn is now devising a plank so they can get out.

Today Marcos clipped stickers off the olive trees. Over 180 years old, they line the driveway to the house and field. People often stop to photograph the arch of trees.

**n JUNE 9**—Tuesday. Today is cloudy again. We walked and checked the fields. Not much is happening. We are having a wedding between the two large oaks. I hope the weather warms up soon.

Today was the farmers market. We traveled to town for supplies and tomatoes. We are all addicted to these wonderful, seemingly out-of-

season tomatoes, mostly beefsteak and cherry.

The hens lay every other day now. Thank goodness, we cannot eat the eggs or sell them fast enough.

**n JUNE 10**—Wednesday. A tour bus full of seniors from Denver visited today. Glenn did a demonstration of the distiller. Lots of questions and laughs from everyone. Somehow he makes it fun each time.

We studied the field again, only to discover a skunk hideout and a nest of squirrels. While the squirrels are reasonably common, the skunks are something new.

Three honey orders arrived. We are becoming famous for our honey. We buy local honey and pour it into a double boiler to simmer; then we put culinary lavender in a cheesecloth and infuse it for aroma and taste. It takes two days to make, and people order it a lot. The trick is to get them to try it once.

**n JUNE 11**—Thursday. This morning was misty again. The field seemed covered in cobwebs. It patiently waited for the sun, but that wasn't in the forecast. We've gone 21 days with temperatures below the norm. With

my fair skin, I've rejoiced, but the tomatoes are not happy.

More visitors from overseas. Everyone always asks if Customs will confiscate the buds. I stress that they are buds, not seeds. We haven't had any complaints yet.

Glenn added a new product. It's a tall plastic bottle with a cheery purple top for making foaming hand soap. It comes out like shaving cream and is popular with younger customers. They sold quickly. We looked at each other in wonderment.

**n JUNE 12**—Friday. Card day. We have a beautiful color postcard of the field in full bloom, which we distribute to each and every motel, hotel and tourist stop in Buellton, Santa Ynez and Solvang.

Glenn and I have made new friends of front desk personnel, who tell us how the week is looking in terms of bookings, helping us focus on which products to make. We are all in this together. They recommend us readily, as the card has a map for the GPS. People now come directly here. The valley has been good to us.

**n JUNE 13**—Saturday. How I wish for summer rain, and my wish came

true today. I love the smell of the rain on the tarmac. Everything is cleaner, and the leaves sparkle.

We made soap and bath salts, which are not difficult now that we're experienced and don't rush. The soap base is made of goat's milk, which we buy in 25-pound bricks. Once we melt it carefully in a double boiler—the smell of burning soap is awful—we pour in the oil and mix.

Then we pour it into molds. After

children out and about. The summer holidays have not quite begun, but private schools may be out already.

An anxious bride called, and Glenn gave her a hopeful update on the bloom. I hope he's right.

A busy Sunday. Made the mortgage again. How does someone give enough thanks to live in a small, safe little town of under 1,000 people and be able to make one's living a stone's throw from the front door?

That evening we all went to a lovely restaurant for dinner. Bo Derek sat near us. A beautiful, classy woman. She gave everyone a smile, possibly hoping we would not stare anymore. We didn't.

**n JUNE 16**—Tuesday. We traveled to the feed store to buy more scratch, grain and alfalfa. The field beckoned us, and we sat near it.

A woman called from Los Angeles. Her family is visiting on Sunday, and she wanted to reserve two dozen eggs. I melted. Fancy that. Each day we sell more eggs.

**n JUNE 17**—Wednesday. I walked around the field and there, looking up at me, was a little baby crow abandoned on the ground. I told Glenn, and we rescued the crow. We put it in a birdcage we keep for such occasions.

**n JUNE 18**—Thursday. A warm sun, though not hot. We did good business and tried to help a florist by picking what blooms we could find for a wedding that required fresh lavender. Alas, it wasn't enough.

**n JUNE 19**—Friday. We decided to empty our old swimming pool, which was built over 60 years ago and is very large but basic. As we opened the vents, the chickens rushed out of the yards to where a small lake was forming.

They know the pickings are excellent in soft earth. Another project was to take all the grass out of the yard around the pool. This was easy to do. Tuna fish salad and ice cream for dinner, and then on to bed.

**n JUNE 20**—Saturday. We walked slowly around the field. Still not much blue. Today we had a small wedding between the large oaks in the field. The morning began misty, but the sun eventually shone through. We were busy and had to close the farm early so that the wedding service would not be disturbed.

Everything went well, and folks seemed satisfied. But I'm not sure I want to continue to host weddings. Too much fussing.



These 180-year-old olive trees create a canopy over the driveway.

Many people tell us, “You do know you live in paradise, don’t you?” I do give thanks every single day.

two hours, we package the soap in little bags. The bath salts are made with kosher Dead Sea salt, some sugar, glycerin and oil. Then they're spooned into the container. This took most of the day, but thank goodness it's done. Nothing like someone asking for more salts and not being able to oblige.

**n JUNE 14**—Sunday. A car was at the gate before 10 a.m. We got a real boost from the Old Santa Ynez Day festival. We're beginning to see

Many people tell us, “You do know you live in paradise, don’t you?” I do give thanks every single day. Life has reached a meadow for me—not that there won't be bumps out there, but for now things are calm and serene.

**n JUNE 15**—Monday. Caroline called. She and Eric are coming with baby Chloe for the night. Ah, that baby! Sunday business spilled into Monday. After Caroline arrived, we sat on the porch with the hens and dogs. Business continued to drive up.

n **JUNE 21**—Sunday. The day was beautiful, and we enjoyed opening the little store and dusting. We needed more bath salts and essential oil, so we prepared those and took them out.

We rounded up our hens for customers who wanted to take photos. Tweety, our favorite, seemed to know what was going on. Lots of eggs sold today.

n **JUNE 22**—Monday. Took cash to the bank and made a healthy deposit. It felt good. I remarked again to my husband how blessed we are.

Buttonwood Farm had fresh peaches, so we went on a short shopping spree—artichokes, strawberries, zucchini and tomatoes, too. Glenn had a short speaking engagement at a local hotel tonight. The day rushed on, but we got it all done.

n **JUNE 23**—Tuesday. Saturday is the Ojai Lavender Festival. Ojai is a beautiful village about two hours away. We have a stall and generally sell over \$2,000 worth of homemade products during the festival.

This week will be devoted to making honey, soap and lavender sachets by the dozen. Sean and I make the sachets, while Glenn dives into the rest.

We labeled and prepared for the next few days. Somehow, strangely, I had a wonderful time as Sean and I chatted about everything. I hope that one day he will keep this farm and take over the business. Not now, of course. School and lots of other wonderful things are in store for him.

n **JUNE 24**—Wednesday. We continued preparing for the festival and made a final list of what we'll take. We took delivery of some bottles and other supplies.

We had to water the field again today, which is becoming expensive. Even though the plants require little water, there are 12,000 of them.

Water in the summer can cost up to \$450 per month. This hurts. But we tried watering less a few years ago—just the way all the books on lavender say—and the results were



Glenn fills gift bags with lavender before opening the store for the day.

poorly produced plants. As soon as we started “overwatering,” they came back right away. They’re truly amazing plants.

n **JUNE 25**—Thursday. Glenn has a helper today. She works three hours on labeling, filling bottles and, most of all, making sachets. They’re easy to make, but after a few hundred, the ends of your fingers get a little numb.

n **JUNE 26**—Friday. Last day to prepare. We’ve packed most of what we made a few days ago, but somehow we still worked until 9:30 p.m. making and bottling oil. It always seems to work out this way.

n **JUNE 27**—Saturday. Today is the Ojai festival. The truck, which was packed with several days’ worth of work, overheated about three miles from the farm. The festival started at 10 a.m., and it was a two-hour drive.

Glenn opened the radiator cap and got the truck home. He soon had the truck back on the road and we made it to the festival on time. It was a great success.

Fortunately, the temperature only made the low 90s. More than 20,000 people from the greater Los Angeles area attended. Glenn had a great day.

n **JUNE 28**—Sunday. Sunday is our second-biggest sales day during

the usual week, Saturday being the best. Glenn unloaded the truck and restocked the store with products that came back from the show. It was another good traffic day.

n **JUNE 29**—Monday. Finally the field is beginning to bloom. It has been a cooler than normal spring, and the bloom is late, but sections of the field can now be cut. We started at 5 p.m.—the lavender must be cut either very early or very late in the day, when the buds are bluest.

This is good, because working in the field in the middle of the day can be exhausting. We try to cut and band 5,000 bunches for the year. The traditional way is to band and hang them, but we don’t have the labor for all the hanging, so we spread them out in a dark stall on plastic. It works.

n **JUNE 30**—Tuesday. We continued to cut bunches. We also cut for buds today. For buds, we cut the plant and spread it out on plastic and let the sun dry it a couple of days. We then gently thrash it by walking on it with rubber-soled shoes, which separates the buds. We rake the stems away with a leaf rake and store the buds.

The earliest, bluest buds are saved to sell by the pound and to use in making sachets. Lavender is very forgiving at harvest time, because the oil remains in the buds until late September even if it is still uncut. So we cut all through the summer. It saves a lot on labor, not having to hire a temporary small army. In a good year, the field will produce 3,000 to 4,000 pounds of buds. We have our work cut out for us.

Thanks so much for reading about a month in the life of our family. Sincerely, Meryl, Sean, Glenn and all the critters big and small.