

Bella Luccè
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SHOPPING
 Early look on new products



May the force be with you
 Ah, fall... The air is crisp, the leaves are turning, and it's time to start thinking about what to wear. Check out the Petrusa Luccè collection at Target! The officially licensed "Star Wars" collection (\$20-\$50 at www.jagat.com) includes a bikini set with attached arms and a headpiece featuring the iconic Han Solo mask.

COMMENTS
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Lela Barker of Irmo has grown a \$500k idea into an international beauty products business.

A glowing success

Columbia's Reality TV biograp
 Chelsea Davis was the first to go on "America's Next Top Model." Moviegoers can see her beauty on "Shopping with the Stars," "Halle Patterson," "Love Me, and I'll Love You" and the first round of "The Amazing Race" in China. "Amazing Race" biographer Chase Ames said on thestate.com: "I just love the way she'll talk about them."

A glowing success

An Irmo entrepreneur cooks up sweet bath and body products, but life hasn't been all rose petals

By **ROBIN COWIE NALEPA**
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IN A BACK ROOM OF AN Irmo office suite, gleaming hot plates for melting oil, large mixers for whipping up shea butter and an industrial grinder for mixing powder populate the stainless steel counters. The area looks and feels more like a commercial kitchen than manufacturing space.

Boxes and buckets of green-tea leaves, lemongrass and dried berries line shelves.

Lela Barker, dressed in a pink tunic and jeans, pops the top on French cocoa absolute, a pure distillation of the beans used to make chocolate. The dark oil smells good enough drink.

"It's all very foodie," says Barker, who is using the ingredient to make Peruvian Chocolate body products for her cosmetics firm, Bella Luccè. "It's great for your skin and great for your body."

Barker, a 30-year-old entrepreneur, has whipped up a heady concoction that smells like success.

The resulting balm is the growing "globally inspired beauty" company Bella Luccè, makers of high-end bath and beauty products found in celebrity grab bags and spas as far away as India, Germany and Dubai.

IN THE KITCHEN
 Barker evokes scenes of lavish royal baths and tropical-paradise as she describes the Bella Luccè products ready for shipment.

She reads about ingredients and beauty rituals from around the world and then finds a way to translate them for Bella Luccè customers.

The Mandi Lulur Petal Bath was inspired by a Javanesse princess bathing ritual. The Tahitian Body Glaze was inspired by lush plants and flowers Barker saw in India and the tropical islands of French Polynesia.

A self-proclaimed bath junkie, Barker also pulls from personal experience. She loves a good long soak.

"I've taken maybe three showers in the last two years," she said. "Baths are about 10 times more fun."

The Bella Luccè line features more than 50 products, from body scrubs to face cream. Costs range from \$175 for the Tower of Treats, featuring Manuka Honey Drizzle, to the \$8 Chocolate Martini or Wildberry Smoothie Manicure-To-Go Kit.

Barker created each one keeping luxury and nature in mind.

After her sister, Mimi, was diagnosed with fibroid tumors in 2000, Barker began researching potential causes for the health



Above: Bella Luccè products have been picked for celebrity swag bags at Cannes and featured at hotels and salons around the world. **Below:** Bella Luccè products are produced and distributed from Irmo.



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 (cont'd)

LIFE & STYLE

SUCCESS

FROM PAGE D1

problems. What she learned about the use of preservatives in many cosmetics set her on a passionate creative path.

Soon she began making all-natural soaps and lotions to share with friends and family. Then in 2001, newly divorced, Barker moved with her two small daughters to a tiny apartment in Knoxville.

After spending months looking for a job, she decided to turn her hobby into something more so she could stay home with her girls. But money was tight. "We were eating government cheese for dinner," Barker said. So she sold a favorite rug for seed money — \$500 — and product development began.

In her tiny kitchen, Barker made batches of beauty products, using a plastic lemonade dispenser to fill bottles. (She keeps the old dispenser in the mixing room of her current office as a reminder of the old days.) She'd then throw parties so her friends could try out the creations.

Originally, Barker thought she would sell her wares at weekend street fairs. Then a friend suggested trying to sell to stores.

In 2003, a \$3,000 order from a chain of gift shops in Knoxville, Earth to Old City, changed the direction and scope of operations for a new company Barker named Bella Luccè, which means "beautiful glow" in Italian.

Earth to Old City owners Vada West and Paula Mcanally remember being impressed with the Bella Luccè products and using them at home. "Barker really put effort into using high-quality ingredients," Mcanally said. "She had shea butter and green teas before it was widely on the market."

Since that first order, Barker and Bella Luccè have upgraded and grown on several levels.

Barker remarried in 2004 and moved to the Columbia area, where her husband and former high-school sweetheart, Chris Barker, an electrical engineer, lived.

She left behind her kitchen and upgraded to 3,000 square feet of office and manufacturing space. Bella Luccè opened an on-line boutique for retail orders. The company now employs a staff of four.

Bella Luccè products have splashed into famous baths via celebrity swag bags at the Cannes Film Festival and Billboard Music Awards.

High-end salons and spas feature Bella Luccè treatments, and products are sold in 38 states and 12 countries. Guests at the Grand Hyatt Dubai in the oil-rich United Arab Emirates are treated to Bella Luccè products created exclusively for the hotel.

Domestic sales for Bella Luccè gross an average of \$25,000 per month, Barker said.

THE RUB

Creating lavish products such as Chocolate Silk Bath Bubbles and becoming a hot commodity among starlets sounds like a dream come true.

Yet it's not all petals in a bathtub.

Barker has fought a million-dollar copyright-infringement lawsuit spawned by the similarity of the Bella Luccè name to that of another entity. The suit was settled out of court, but the fight drained Barker's family financially.

She also has found the demands of the company eating at more of her time, saying it is all consuming.

"People don't know how hard



KIM KIM FOSTER-TOBIN/KKFOSTER@THESTATE.COM

Barker fills in for her production manager, who was injured recently.

WHERE TO GET IT

S.C. retailers where Bella Luccè beauty products are sold

■ Cloud Nine Market
 916 Gervais St.
 (803) 256-0043

■ Elante Day Spa
 108 Palmetto Park Blvd.
 Suite E, Lexington
 (803) 808-7747

■ Total Life Care
 975 J. Savannah Highway,
 Charleston
 (843) 402-0310

Or visit Bella Luccè's online boutique at www.bellaluccè.com.

tier cake.

"She's the (boss) everyone wishes they had," Finney said.

Barker is still getting used to being the boss but says it does have its perks.

"If I want to come to work in

my pj's, I will," she said, with a laugh.

Another perk of Barker's position is international travel.

A recent trip to Mumbai (formerly Bombay), India, prompted her to re-channel the promotional money budgeted for celebrity events, such as gift bags, to increase the amount of corporate giving to those in need.

"We may not get as much press, but I'll sleep better at night," she said.

Barker said she was raised with heavy Buddhist overtones.

"I'm a big believer in karma. If you do good, you'll get good."

In 2006, Bella Luccè partnered with Trickle Up, an organization that gives small grants to women in developing countries to start their own businesses. "I believe in girl power," she said.

WAITING FOR THE BIG TIME

Barker says she has been

blessed by success in just three years of building Bella Luccè, but there's more she would like to achieve.

"We've got about 10 steps before the big time," she said.

To Barker, hitting the big time means new products, wider distribution — and "a lot less stress."

Eventually, she said, she'd like her role at Bella Luccè to be purely creative: "I could live without managing."

Until then, she'll do what she needs to do.

On some days, that means Barker will change into an old white work shirt and head to the back room, where she will measure and mix the exotic and natural ingredients found in the beauty masks, scrubs and moisturizers she created.

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it is, how bad you have to want it, how much you have to dig in," she said.

She still relishes coming up with new products.

"That's more fun than who showed up for work today or sales projections," she said.

Barker's husband, Chris, has been a source of support for his wife during the company's growing pains.

"It is really her drive that keeps pushing her through," Chris Barker said. "She will fight through all of it to keep going."

GIRL POWER AND KARMA

Lela Barker does not appear hardened by her challenges. She smiles frequently and talks easily, floating from one topic to another — from religion to her wild-child stage.

As a young woman, the free-spirited Barker made an unconventional choice. In 1997, she dropped out of the University of Memphis to become a "rave queen" and go-go dance the nights away — fully clothed, she adds with a smile — in Memphis clubs.

She still likes a good party. Jackie Finney, Bella Luccè's director of operations, says Barker routinely celebrates the company and her employees.

Barker keeps the small refrigerator in the employee break room stocked with drink mixers and treats for impromptu socials. She praises her staff frequently in and out of their earshot. And Bella Luccè routinely throws parties like the one for its third anniversary, complete with custom four-