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One thing that puzzles new soapmakers is instructions to stir your soap mixture till it shows a condition called trace. This is described as when the mixture is so thick that, if you dribble a bit of the mixture back into the pot, a “trace” of what you dribble will remain on the surface.

Beginning soapmaking books often contain close-up photos of soap at trace. I remember squinting at many of them, trying to figure it all out. When I started making soap, I made two successful batches, fretting about trace the whole time. The soap came out fine, but I was sure I was doing something wrong. I hadn't seen anything that looked like the photos.

It was my good luck to have a friend who had been a high school chemistry teacher. When I phoned and told her about my difficulties with trace, she asked what it was. I was surprised a chemist didn't know, but I explained as best I could. There was a brief silence. Of course I couldn't see her, but she was probably rubbing her forehead—which she does when anyone says something that makes no sense. Finally, she said, “You don't need to worry about that. If you just measure correctly, control the temperature, and mix your ingredients well, you'll get soap.”

I decided to follow her advice, and I've never lost a batch of soap. Follow mine, and you won't either.

But why the difference? Are all those soap books wrong?

Not really. With hand stirring, you do have to look for trace. That's because saponification—the chemical reaction that creates soap—has to thicken the mixture to that point before you can stop stirring and pour it into the mold. Otherwise, some of the fat and the lye solution could still separate, leaving the reaction incomplete.

But in modern craft soapmaking, hand stirring is most often replaced by use of a stick blender. This blends the fat and the lye solution so rapidly and thoroughly that they quickly get mixed down to a microscopic level. That not only gets the mixture saponifying a whole lot faster, it also helps hold the fat and the lye solution together while it's happening.

Of course, the chemistry is more complicated than that, but the bottom line is that you don't have to wait for the mixture to thicken all the way to trace before pouring it into the mold. It will get there after you pour it.

How do you know when you can stop blending? Don't worry, I'll describe the signs for you. You'll be able to tell by sight, by sound, and even by temperature. Yes, you'll be able to gauge it with a thermometer!