



Chill Out

Wellness for body, mind and soul

YELLOW FEVER These pieces of hardened mastic sap traveled a long way to make you beautiful.

Pitch perfect

An ancient sap from Greece may be the next beauty wonder treatment By **Polly Kreisman** Photograph by **Dan Saelinger**

The best health and beauty products often come from time-tested natural ingredients, such as witch hazel and aloe. New Yorkers will soon learn of a new one that, if its reputation holds up, will become as popular in city medicine cabinets as tea-tree oil. The wonder ingredient is mastic, which comes from an evergreen scrub tree that grows on the Greek island of Chios. The legendary clear sap that oozes from the scaly, chalk-colored bark of the mastic has been prized by Greeks since the ancients first started chewing the woody- and fruity-tasting substance to relieve ulcers and stomach pain. And the first written references to mastic appear in a first-century pharmacological treatise by the Greek physician Dioscorides, who noted that mastic "makes the face shiny."

Natural wonders

These exotic flora are said to give exceptional health and beauty results

Hoodia gordonii

The San people of the Kalahari Desert in South Africa have eaten the cactus-like succulent *Hoodia* for thousands of years to stave off hunger on long hunting trips. Only the *gordonii* version causes this desired effect, by tricking the brain into thinking one feels full. The plant is difficult to cultivate and illegal to collect in the wild without a permit. But since South African scientists discovered the appetite-suppressing molecule in the plant, which they labeled P57, *Hoodia gordonii* has garnered enough attention to sprout hundreds of supplements for sale on the Internet. Eat (or not eat) at your own risk.

Jangli seeds

Oil from the seeds of the jangli, thick-trunked trees native to Asia, has traditionally been used in Indian Ayurvedic medicine to treat skin diseases. But the oil is also said to increase the lipolytic activity in caffeine, a popular agent in fat-fighting skin products on today's market. Based on this research, Parisian luxury cosmetics company Nivea recently released a cellulite cream that combines jangli seed oil with caffeine to boost the stimulant's efficacy (so your nether won't jangle).

Kudzu

The much maligned weed (not the marginally maligned comic strip) has long been a staple in traditional Chinese medicine. The roots, leaves and stems are dry roasted, sautéed or steamed—though most often the plant is simply processed for its starch—for the treatment of everything from allergies to measles. Recent experiments have focused on its ability to lower blood pressure and lessen the desire for alcohol. Although somewhat inconclusive, the studies are still promising—especially for those drinking to forget about their kudzu overrun gardens.

—Lane Borden

In addition to the purported health and beauty properties, what's remarkable about mastic is that the tree—at least the kind which produces resin—won't grow anywhere else on earth, not even on other Greek islands. And no one has ever proved why. Some locals say it's due to an underwater volcano; others simply posit that Chios provides the perfect balance of sun, rain and soil for the species.

Even though mastic has been traveling the world since the 15th century—Christopher Columbus was said to have sent word to Queen Isabella that he would return from Chios with spices and mastic, which he also called white gold—only in recent years has *mastiha* become a basic ingredient in beauty products. Greek cosmetics giant Korres sells a limited mastic line in London, Barcelona and Athens, but no one has sold such products—which claim to aid in skin regeneration, scar healing, body firming and cellulite reduction—in the United States until now.

"Chios is one of the few places left in the world with a unique secret most Americans have never heard of," says Michael Sodis, general manager of MasticSpa, which will open its first U.S. store in Soho on July 1. He and his brother George, third-generation pharmacists on Chios, created a line of more than 200 mastic-based products—ranging from bubble bath and moisturizing lotion to toothpaste—that are sold in a chain of MasticSpa stores in Greece. The formulas for their products come from secret, proprietary recipes the brothers discovered during a renovation of their Chios flagship location last year: The Sodis's great-great-grandfather, Mixaelis Sodis, had squirreled away the family formulas in a wall for safekeeping.

Despite the name, there is no "spa" at the Soho MasticSpa; the owners say the location is ideal for their products, but too small for treatment rooms. Among the products the new store will carry are an array of brightly colored, irregularly shaped, glycerinlike chunks of soap. Each combines the thick, harvested mastic sap with any number of other ingredients to accommodate a variety of skin types and needs: with green tea for "shine and revitalization," with honeysuckle to "tighten the pores of the face," or with almond pits and wild chestnuts to "reduce cellulite." There are also pleasantly medicinal-smelling mastic-based moisturizers to "inhibit the aging of cells" and masks for "shine and refreshment."

Mastic's wonder-inducing abilities within the body have been supported—recent studies at the University of Nottingham, England, and at the University of Athens in Greece suggest that mastic kills the bacteria that causes ulcers in the stomach and decay on the gums and teeth. But as is the case with most beauty products, the magical claims of mastic's skin-toning and age-defying effects are personal and anecdotal at best, though still exciting. Among those who've had a chance to preview the products, Joanne Latimer,

a fashion editor in Montreal, swears by the shampoo and body lotions ("They feel like a timeless cure," she says), while a beauty editor who wishes to remain nameless claims the cellulite soap is "the only thing that's ever worked on my ass."

Today, if Columbus were to read the storefront sign on West Broadway, he would see that mastic is still heralded as the "all-natural beauty secret of the Aegean." Only now, he could take the subway to get it.

MasticSpa opens July 1 at 436-438 West Broadway between Prince and Spring Sts (212-219-3251, www.masticspa.com).

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