

T H E R I S E O F G - B E A U T Y

Consumers are swapping the convoluted 12-step routines of K-beauty for a more simple, honest approach, writes **Adriaane Pielou**

Stand aside, K-beauty, G-beauty coming through. For the past decade, South Korea's beauty products have ruled the world's \$74 billion (Dh271.7bn) facial-care industry. Now, German skincare looks like the answer to the eternal quest for a smooth, clear complexion. Powered by close-ups of porcelain skin, the 12-step, or in some cases even 17-step, K-beauty rituals have been the subject of thousands of magazine editorials, YouTube tutorials and social media posts. Technologically impressive, K-beauty has introduced some undeniably fun innovations.

But in fiddling about every night with cleansing sticks and cushion compacts, scooping out jiggy "bounce cream", patting on an essence, pumping out a different serum for the eye area, cheeks, forehead and neck, then unwrapping and smoothing on a hydrating sleeping pack (panda face, cat face or cute message? Up to you), we have basically been slathering on chemical after chemical (well, apart from the snail mucus that earned South Korea much publicity a few years ago. Naturally high in hydrating hyaluronic acid, that was a little too natural for some consumers). Once the novelty has worn off, who has the time or ▶

► energy, let alone the bathroom cabinet space, to plod through that kind of overcomplicated ritual?

Hence the allure of German skincare, which is known for its simplicity. Cleanser, toner, moisturiser: quick, efficient and easy to use, with the emphasis, like German engineering, on performance and function. Products applied, cotton-wool pads chucked in the bin, and you're done. Three or four minutes max.

Germany maintains strict rules about the safety and quality of its skincare. The country's authorities also approve far fewer ingredients for use than many other countries, such as the United States. At a time when people are increasingly concerned about the provenance of everything they buy, that is reassuring.

However, it's not only their relatively small number of comprehensible ingredients and the thrifty straightforwardness of their delivery systems (basically, a pot) that make German products so appealing. Traditionally based on medicinal plants and herbs, much of German skincare is still composed of ingredients grown the way they were a century or so ago. Not on the kind of pesticide-soaked mega-farms that supply to many major well-known brands now, but on smaller farms run on organic lines, without chemical additions, or bio-dynamically, using composting and crop rotation to keep the soil healthy.

With the market for clean beauty on the rise – this section of the skincare market grew 44 per cent in 2018, as opposed to skincare's growth overall of 13 per cent – German-made creams and lotions chime perfectly with the zeitgeist. Along, of course, with the clean beauty mantra: "Don't put anything on your skin that you wouldn't put in your mouth."

Radiant skin, as most of us have come to wryly recognise, is mostly about what we eat and how we live on a day-to-day basis. But what we put on our skin has a considerable effect on its outer layers, and can also, depending on molecule size, seep into our tissues and blood stream. That's why skincare products should ideally be as pure and chemical-free as our food.

One of the first skincare pioneers to live by (or at least sell by) the clean beauty mantra was German-born doctor, Max Huber. He was the rocket scientist who formulated the famous La Mer cream – still a bestseller, at about €125 (Dh506) for 30ml – while trying to heal burns he sustained in his laboratory. In the 1980s – he launched it in 1983 – he was absolutely everywhere, demonstrating its purity to beauty editors and department store buyers by taking a fingerful from a pot and eating it.

Yet since the 1980s, as the skincare business has exploded, most formulations have become evermore toxic. Shockingly, of the 70,000 skincare products listed on the "Skin Deep" database of cosmetics and skincare investigated by American activist organisation Environmental Working Group – which unmask the not-so-beautiful side of the beauty industry – only 1,250 have been judged to contain nothing potentially toxic or provenly carcinogenic.

None of the parabens, phthalates or formaldehyde in many of the other 68,750 products, that is to say, scary. But it makes the traditional image of the German woman with her healthy, all-natural look – rosy cheeks, unmade-up skin, shining eyes – more alluring than ever in an age obsessed with transparency, authenticity and super-purity.

Valued at €17 billion in 2018, German skincare has a long pedigree. Nivea, one of the best-known face creams, and the world's first stable water-in-oil emulsion, was formulated by German chemist Dr Isaac Lifschutz and launched in 1911. Kate Winslet and Joan Collins have both said they use it. Purity has been a prime selling point for German skincare ever since the organic Weleda, a Swiss-German brand, launched in 1921, solving the problems of many sensitive-skinned folk – inexpensively, too; most items in the range still sell for under €25.

More recently launched brands include Lavera – which comes from verum, the Latin word for truth, and founded by Thomas Haase in Hanover in 1987. The brand produces more than 300 organic ingredients itself for its 280-product line. Just Pure,



The production of Nivea in 1958. The cream was formulated by German chemist Dr Isaac Lifschutz, and launched in 1911

A former orthopaedic surgeon, she radiates health and reliability. In her twenties, however, she suffered from skin problems that nothing seemed to cure. The "blood cream" she launched to such excitement in 2003 came about after she'd seen the soothing, anti-inflammatory results of the plasma she injected into her patients' joints and wondered if it might have an equally effective result if applied to the face. It did.

The cream got massive publicity, but was complicated to deliver, since it involved each buyer giving a small sample of their blood and then waiting a few days while it was added to their own pot of cream. Fine in a spa setting, but impractical at beauty counters. Sensibly, however, she followed it up in 2013 with a simpler Molecular Cosmetics range – serums, masks, cleansers and moisturisers packaged with exquisite minimalism – and has occupied the bestseller slot at Space NK pretty much continuously ever since. That's despite, or perhaps because of, charging €290 for 30ml of Super Anti-Ageing Serum.

Professor Augustinus Bader had an even better story. The shy director of applied stem cell biology at the University of Leipzig caused paroxysms of delight and desire when in 2018 he launched a single product called, simply, The Cream. After spending 30 years researching how to treat child burns victims, he'd formulated a gel that eliminated the need for a skin graft – The Cream was powerful, containing a mix of amino acids, high-grade vitamins, and oils of evening primrose, argan and avocado. Plus, he'd launched it to raise funds to continue his research. "The best cream I have ever used," enthused Carla Bruni. Other celebrity fans include Victoria Beckham and Margot Robbie.

The endearing professor has since added The Rich Cream to his line, also selling at about €205 for 50ml and also based on technology that directs the natural ingredients to activate stem cells within the body. And if that isn't a win-win story that makes you feel virtuous about spending hundreds on a face cream, what is?

Meanwhile, Dr Timm Golueke – one of Germany's top dermatologists, with a practice near Valentino and Jil Sander on Maximilianstrasse in Munich – has made his name by being the first person to use fern in skincare. Fern was the first plant to emerge from the sea and flourish on land, and being an evergreen naturally highly resistant to sunlight makes it a powerful anti-inflammatory ingredient. Royal Fern products such as the Phytoactive Anti-Ageing cream, at €235 for 50ml, are thus logically effective on rosacea and to protect against sun damage. When I met him recently at the launch of the new Urban Retreat day spa in London, where he is now seeing clients for a week each month, Dr Golueke told me he'd visited South Korea for research. He'd been very impressed by some of the technology, such as their Ultraformer, he said, which uses ultrasound to tighten the skin. "But I was so surprised, when I went to Seoul," he added earnestly. "I saw so much bad skin."

PS. Remember BB creams, or "blemish balms", an apparent South Korean invention that in 2011 started the whole K-beauty thing? It was invented in the 1950s by a German. Dermatologist Dr Christine Schrammek developed the balm as a way to protect her patients' skin after a chemical peel and to give them some colour at the same time. ■



ROYAL FERN (2) BEIERSDORF AG

Royal Fern harnesses the powerful anti-inflammatory nature of the eponymous plant in its products, such as the Phytoactive Anti-Ageing cream, which is effective on rosacea

■ In the 1980s, Dr Max Huber launched the La Mer cream and demonstrated its purity by taking a fingerful from a pot and eating it

meanwhile, sells its small-batch products mostly to top spas, harvesting its all-organic ingredients only according to the phases of the Moon. "So sometimes we have only a couple of days for production," says founder Gabriela Just.

Many of Germany's most famous lines, however, have been – and continue to be – doctor-led. After all, deservedly or not, there's nothing like a white coat to lend an air of trustworthiness. The country's best-known organic line, Dr Hauschka, was launched in 1931. Its delicate lotions – based on ingredients such as calendula, rose and lavender, as close to 100 per cent organic as possible – were developed by a small group of idealists that included the eponymous doctor's friend, Dr Rudolf Steiner, a great proponent of biodynamic farming.

Even the scent of Dr Hauschka's bestselling Rose Day Cream (about €30.50 for 30ml) makes you feel soothed. Four tonnes of rose petals are needed to make just a kilo of the rose oil that is its principle ingredient. And the light Night Serum, designed to let the skin regenerate by itself instead of suffocating under a rich night cream, has no doubt simplified many night-time regimes. Users and enthusiasts include Julia Roberts, Kylie Minogue and Jennifer Aniston.

The star of the new generation of German doctor-led lines? Made in Germany might not be as powerful a selling-point on a face cream as Made in Italy is on a jacket, if it weren't for Dr Barbara Sturm. It is perhaps the Düsseldorf resident who, more than anyone, can be credited with kick-starting the current craze for German skincare.