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Made TO ORDER

Couture isn't just for clothes; skin-care companies are taking the bespoke approach too, with formulas tailored to your age, ethnicity and even DNA. TEXT: MICHELLE VILLET

Having something made to measure was once a privilege reserved for the well heeled, accompanied by a hefty price tag and a months-long waiting list. Not anymore. Sure, you probably still can't afford a Christian Lacroix gown—or the time-consuming fittings in Paris—but when it comes to your skin, ordering a customized skin-care regimen is now within reach. A handful of suppliers have emerged, offering products that can be adjusted for a myriad of factors—from the condition of your complexion to the climate you live in—and all for not much more than mass-market prices.

Customization isn't exactly new to the beauty industry. In makeup, Prescriptives' colour-printing service has been around since 1979, while Guerlain, Cartier and even The Body Shop offer custom-blended fragrances. But it's only recently that skin care has taken centre stage. "The emphasis on skin—rather than colour and fragrance—is the big change," says Alan Middleton, a

marketing professor at York University's Schulich School of Business. "It's all about what you can do to keep your skin clear and youthful—and the more individualized it is, the better."

In the United States, Sephora is testing Skinphysical, a diagnostic tool that may be available at Canadian locations in the future. It's comprised of two skin sensors, a facial-imaging system and a device that measures the shade of your teeth. Those who undergo the 35-minute analysis receive a report that covers everything from UV damage to pore size. Laura Filancia, Sephora's director of training and development, says that providing a customized experience is key. "Every client has unique needs and receives an individual analysis and product recommendations," she says.

If tools like Skinphysical prove successful, they could usher in a new era in retailing in which customers receive consultations and custom-blended products, all in one visit. That is what's in the works for BioNova, whose

N1-Custom line is available at Barneys New York. Currently, customers fill out lengthy questionnaires that ask about their age, ethnic background and pore size and the climate they live in; next year, this will be supplemented by a skin-scanning device. The information is used to create customized moisturizers, cleansers and the like, which come complete with each customer's name on the labels. "The chances of repeating your formula are one in 60 million," says executive vice-president Irina Tatishvili. "This is the natural alternative to invasive cosmetic procedures."

Also available at Barneys is Skincareoptions (SCO), which sells what it calls "situation-specific" skin care. "We start with products that are already effective on their own," says owner Theresa Ma. "Then I allow up to three infusions, based on whatever your concerns are. For example, we add caffeine to address puffiness, vitamin K for dark circles and acetyl hexapeptide for fine lines." ▷





Bionova Nano Skin Tech N1-Custom Facial Anti-Stress Care (\$130 to \$500)

SCO Conditioning Face Lotion - Oil Free (\$152.49)

PRESCRIBEDsolutions Customized Skincare Radical Results Antioxidant Serum C + E and Brightening Booster (\$111)

Dermagenetics DNA UltraCustom Night Renewal Anti-Wrinkle/Firming (\$167.18)

PRESCRIBEDsolutions Customized Skincare Correction Fluid Anti-aging Night Cream (\$89.91). For details, see Shopping Guide.

Dermatologists are forever telling us to pare down our skin-care regimens, but can they, too, get behind the bespoke skin-care trend? It depends. “I think it’s a good thing,” says Dr. Peter Vignjevic, a practising dermatologist in Hamilton, Ont. “The more specific products are for the skin, the better. But for some products, I wonder: do you need something *that* customized, or are you just paying for something that’s trendy?” He also points out that

“THE MORE SPECIFIC PRODUCTS ARE FOR THE SKIN, THE BETTER.”

blending active ingredients may reduce their effectiveness. “Some molecules are so fragile that if you mix them, you lose the benefits,” he says. “And if each person has her own formulation, it can be very expensive and time-consuming.”

One line that some dermatologists are endorsing is the New York-based PRESCRIBEDsolutions Customized Skincare, which is available only through doctor’s offices. A customer must first receive a consultation

before a doctor will blend products with boosters that are appropriate to her skin’s needs. “Our philosophy is that most people want something customized, but they don’t want to do it themselves,” says chief operating officer Aurelian Lis. “They want an expert who will tell them that this is exactly the way they need it.” In addition to receiving a medical diagnosis, customers can enjoy the benefits of a streamlined regimen. “With high-performing, multi-tasking products that are customized, a patient doesn’t have to layer as much,” says Lis. “That’s why doctors are so gung-ho about them.”

Naturally, the ultimate in customization is a product based on your own genetic makeup. Dermagenetics sells an anti-aging cream created from the results of an at-home DNA test. “We look at collagen breakdown, photo-aging, skin slackening and your skin’s ability to tolerate environmental pollutants,” says John Souza, director of business development. “Instead of the mass-produced approach that all other companies are taking, we pick the ingredients that you—and only you—need.” Another company that’s jumping on the DNA bandwagon is AlphaGenics, whose JeneJuice—a soon-to-be-launched “lifestyle beverage”—contains ingredients that are adjusted based on how they interact with your genes, with the promise of a

more youthful appearance. And in the realm of supplements, health-care firm Salugen recently launched SpaGen, a DNA-customized nutritional support program.

Dr. Jason Rivers, a clinical professor of dermatology at The University of British Columbia in Vancouver, thinks products that are tailored to our genes are, for now, still science fiction. “They are definitely making strides—certain diseases, like lung cancer and breast cancer, may have certain gene profiles,” he says. “But most of the changes we see in the skin are not due to DNA but rather related to sun damage and the environment. The environmental factor is what we’re trying to reverse.”

Whether it’s a single-ingredient booster or the extreme route of a DNA test, customized skin care is actually less cutting-edge than it sounds. After all, it wasn’t that long ago that women were seeking out apothecaries to whip up their own made-to-measure skin potions. And in today’s world—where mass-market chains like Starbucks and Gap have become ubiquitous—perhaps the popularity of custom-made products is simply reflecting an old-fashioned need in all of us: the longing for a little personal attention. “People want to find something that’s effective and unique—not mass-market—and made just for them,” says Ma. □