

## Do pricey products deliver?

**Eva Friede**

CanWest News Service

MONTREAL -- In a grainy, black-and-white film, a safari-suited scientist hikes through the rainforest of Madagascar in search of the rare vanilla planifolia, an ingredient to grace Chanel's latest and most costly anti-aging skin care cream, Sublimage.

The production values for the film are strangely poor for Chanel, whose usual promotional material tends to the magnificent. But this is as slick a marketing campaign as the glossy, gold-toned press packet for the \$325 jar of face cream.

Chanel appears to be tracking a remote and mythical fountain of youth in its campaign for Sublimage. And it is far from alone in upping the ante and price for the promise of youthful skin. Polynesian lagoon water, glacier ice, caviar, narcissus bulbs, kelp and pulp derived from South African grasslands are among the incredible ingredients touted to smooth wrinkles, lighten, brighten and rejuvenate your skin.



CREDIT: Marie-France Coallier, CanWest News Service

A great complexion is 'all about hygiene,' says esthetician Irene Yiannatsoulia.

Prestige products that promise the moon and cost the stars are among the trends rocking the booming skin-care industry. Whitening products, a blurring of mass and prestige technology, and cosmeceuticals or doctor lines are also feeding the sales of beauty lotions and potions, which amounted to \$55.5 billion US worldwide in 2005.

In the luxury arena, which could be trying to distance itself from increasingly sophisticated mass-market products, Christian Dior has just launched L'Or de Vie, \$380 for the cream, \$420 for the extract, derived from the "miracle of Yquem," home of sauterne wines. Meanwhile, Guerlain has Orchidee Imperiale, packaged in a beautiful cobalt jar, at \$425. In fall, Giorgio Armani will come out with Crema Nera with obsidian, a mineral compound found in the volcanic soil of Pantelleria. Not impressed? How about Valmont's L'Elixir des Glaciers or La Prairie's Skin Caviar Luxe Cream, each at \$750?

Many companies seem to be trying to mimic the mythology of Creme de la Mer, the well-preserved granny in luxury skin care formulated by NASA scientist Max Huber, who is said to have cooked up a "broth" of kelp and vitamins to heal burns. It rings in at what today sounds like a reasonable \$275.

And some people are lapping it up.

"Cost is not an issue," said Shelley Rozenwald, former VP of cosmetics at Holt Renfrew.

"If the product works they will buy it."

The first substances with independent studies to verify claims of skin rejuvenation are glycolic and lactic acids, Vitamin C and tretinoin -- prescribed under various brand

names -- and its derivative, retinol, said dermatologist Suzanne Gagnon.

Then there is a growing body of literature on peptides, or micro-collagen, ceramides for moisturizing, antioxidants like green tea and idebenone (developed by Allergan, makers of Botox), she added.

However, cosmetics are not standardized, so there is no guarantee you will get an effective concentration in your beauty cream, she said.

Your best bets are those clinical brands, she suggested, naming Reversa, NeoStrata, Rejuviance, Dermaglow and Strivectin.

The extravagant formulations from pricey ingredients might be effective, Gagnon said, but not necessarily more so than less expensive ingredients.

"The truth is there are impressive skin care and makeup products at all prices," Paula Begoun, a skin-care expert known as the cosmetics cop, wrote in an e-mail response to our queries.

Among some of the less expensive ingredients: calcium, soy, shiitake and a veritable cocktail of fruits and veggies.

And don't forget your broad-spectrum sun protection, all dermatologists order. That means UVA and UVB filters, found in Parsol 1789, also known as avobenzone, Tinosorb, and L'Oreal's proprietary Mexoryl, as well as zinc oxide and titanium dioxide.

Dermatologists are conventional: They want studies, they want proof, Gagnon said.

Dermatologist Ari Demirjian has not seen studies on most of the luxury products: "Most likely they're lacking some sort of true medical or scientific clinical trial to back their claims," he said.

"I would like to see a few studies on a product showing that it actually does something, and those studies being independent studies, not from the factory that is making the product."

Confused yet?

You should be. Euromonitor International, a Chicago-based market research firm, reports that one of the main trends in the Canadian skin care industry is increasingly blurred lines between prestige and mass market brands, the result of technological advances.

The promises of technology -- and marketing -- are enticing to our aging population, and to a younger demographic that wants to prevent signs of aging: In Canada, sales of skin care products hit \$955.5 million in 2006, up from \$900 million the previous year, according to Euromonitor.

Virginia Lee, a research analyst with the firm, says Canadians seem more skeptical and value conscious, with less disposable income than U.S. consumers and fewer department store outlets for luxury goods.

In terms of the advances of mass market companies, P&G's Olay led the way, with products boasting similar benefits to more expensive products. Cosmetics giant L'Oreal is also able to diffuse research from premium brands in its stable like Lancome, while Johnson & Johnson borrows from its research with Renova, or tretinoin, for its drugstore brand, Neutrogena, according to Lee.

"The speed of technology in the mass market has increased. Ten years ago, it took a very long time for technology from the premium level to filter down to the mass," she said.

Still, there's probably a difference between the expensive and cheaper creams.

"I doubt it's the same product and I would think they would be using a lower concentration of the active ingredient," Lee said.

Some of those ingredients may be costly, she added, but it's questionable how well they work.

"At some level, they do offer some kind of a benefit or people wouldn't buy it."

Among the benefits one can reasonably expect is, at the very least, a dewier complexion bestowed even by a \$5 moisturizer, Lee said.

Light reflectors can make skin seem more luminous, she said, and most dermatologists agree retinol helps speed cell turnover and stimulate collagen while antioxidants kill off free radicals.

Other products have more of a visual effect, by plumping up cells or filling in lines -- temporarily, she added.

Whitening products are also having their day -- out of the sun. Hydroquinone has the highest efficacy and longest history of safe usage behind it, according to Begoun.

Another key trend, especially in the United States, is the advent of doctor brands, with dermatologists developing their own lines and selling them on talk shows like Oprah, Lee said.

These brands, also known as cosmeceuticals, have a medicinal atmosphere about them, with clean, no-nonsense packaging.

They span the high end, with lines like SkinCeuticals and Cellcosmet, to more accessible brands like Vichy, RoC and Avene.

And consumers are buying into organic or natural products, too. Stella McCartney has just launched Care, which promises luxury in the certified organic line.

Cosmeceuticals are the flavour of the day, says Robert Lavoie, president of Montreal's Dermtek Pharmaceuticals, who has an impressive record in the skin care business.

He launched his company 21 years ago with four products for specific conditions and eventually developed two groundbreaking brands: Ombrelle, with Parsol 1789 -- broad spectrum sun protection (which he sold to L'Oreal 10 years ago), and Reversa, with glycolic acid, the first and most documented molecule for anti-aging.

It "tickles the collagen back into production, it hydrates the skin, it creates exfoliation.

"So it really is the only molecule that will truly give glow to the face," Lavoie said.

STILL CONFUSED?

"Regrettably, there is no magic potion or combination of products in any price range that can truly make wrinkles disappear," Begoun wrote.

Here is what works in helping the skin repair itself and function optimally, according to Begoun.

- Daily application of a state-of-the-art sunscreen, with SPF 15 or higher as well as antioxidants.

- Tretinoin -- Retin A, Renova or Avita -- and tazarotene -- Tazorac. These are prescription drugs (which some people find difficult to tolerate).

- Alpha or beta-hydroxy acids (AHAs and BHAs), including glycolic, lactic and salicylic acids.
- Hydroquinone-based, skin-lightening products.
- A gentle cleanser.
- A well-formulated, state-of-the-art moisturizer.

© The Vancouver Sun 2007

CLOSE WINDOW

Copyright © 2008 CanWest Interactive, a division of CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.. All rights reserved.  
CanWest Interactive, a division of CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.. All rights reserved.