



NEW AGE, NEW YOU?

Forget Botox. Acupuncture, reiki and energy-cleansing facials are taking over the lunch-hour treatment's terrain. Do they work?
ALISON GARWOOD-JONES
investigates

WHEN HALLE BERRY WEARS A LEOPARD-SKIN jasper gemstone to repel disharmony, it seems like charming eccentricity. And when Robert Downey Jr. hires "The Crystal Man," sporting an attaché heavy with healing gems, to follow him around on set to ward off addictions—well, we expect that from artists. But when the rest of us—teachers, techies, bankers—begin swapping our lunchtime Botox sessions for chakra facials to achieve major glow, acupuncture to delete dark circles, or reiki to reduce wrinkles, you know change is afoot.

You can thank the multi-billion-dollar yoga movement. When the downward dog went mainstream in North America in the mid-'90s, women traded their Monday night prime time for Eastern-based soul sessions—in part to atone for weekend sins, while in secret pursuit of a sleeker torso and Gwyneth's gorgeousness. The sister trend of New Age beauty, rooted in energy-based beliefs or alt-medicine, evolved from a fringe interest to an increasingly common cosmetic fix.

"Before, you'd walk into a health-food store and there would be a flyer for reiki on the community bulletin board," says Christine O'Grady, head of business development for Holtz Spa in Ottawa, which offers

vibrational energy work within sight of the Parliament Buildings. "But it was all a bit uncomfortable, because you'd go to someone's house, so you could never be sure what you were getting into."

Today, even the swankiest spas and clinics are touting reiki "facelifts," anti-aging acupuncture, and Ayurvedic facials suited to your governing dosha. Inside the retro-glam Quartz Crystal Spa at the year-old Trump International Hotel Toronto, for example, treatments inspired by the CEO's love of 19th-century Russian quartz baths, including facials that harness "energy-awakening quartz thermal waters," boost skin clarity and radiance. Across town, in the chakra-named rooms of the equally luxe Four Seasons Spa (which opened this past fall), Eastern-based skin healing and spiritual nurturing are on the menu, with one holistic facial promising luminous results courtesy of crystal wands.

Despite the scant science behind most of these treatments, a growing number of women are buying in (costs for such five-star facials reach upwards of \$250). "I always feel more centred and at peace in my own skin after I get it done," says Melanie Rosen, a child psychotherapist in Toronto who undergoes reiki regularly. She likens the results to the feeling you get after dancing. "You've >

moved your energy through your whole system, which makes anyone look more attractive.”

Beauty editor Gracey Hitchcock, a former Torontonian now based in Atlanta, is no stranger to state-of-the-art lotions, potions and trendy Botox, yet she was inspired to try the wrinkle-smoothing powers of an ancient tradition. “People were saying acupuncture was the secret of Hong Kong’s elite,” recalls Hitchcock, who booked in with Fong Wang, a Toronto acupuncturist. “My goal with cosmetic acupuncture—as with yoga, weight training and a healthy diet—is to slow the clock. Prevention is the strength of all holistic treatments.” Soon after starting her needle sessions, she noticed a new refinement to her skin. “The puffiness and sallowness were gone, and there was definitely a firmer look to the contours.”

These beauty benefits happen because the body’s chi (or life energy) is strengthened and circulated when needles are strategically inserted at the intersections of energy pathways, explains Wang. The whole body reacts, increasing blood flow from head to toe. “When you have 40–50 needles in your face, collagen levels increase, too.” One treatment even stimulates the chi of internal organs: “Brighter eye whites are the result of a healthy liver, and that happens when we work with needles on the feet.” Claims like this always trip up Western medicine, which can easily explain the circulatory, digestive and nervous systems, but has yet to decode the invisible meridians that link your feet, liver and eyes—at least according to traditional Chinese medicine.

Still, women with far more serious issues than fine lines and lost lustre are migrating to alt-beauty cures. After topical antibiotics and anti-redness creams flop, some chronic rosacea sufferers attribute clear and balanced skin to Ayurvedic dosha facials. Karley Gittens, a 38-year-old graphic designer in Oakville, Ont., discovered they worked wonders for her as a post-laser therapy. “The laser treatments cleared up my broken capillaries, but the dosha facials calmed my skin and kept the redness from coming back,” she says.

Ayurveda, an ancient medicine originating in India, dictates that our constitutions are composed of three energies, or doshas—vata (air), kapha (water and earth) and pitta (fire), says Kristen Ma, Ayurvedic practitioner and co-founder of Pure + Simple in Toronto, the spa Gittens frequents. “Ayurveda treats the root cause of skin inflammation from the inside out,” says Ma, who turned to alt-beauty after years of battling her own acne. “In the case of rosacea, it’s about managing the pitta dosha because it governs all inflammation, heat and metabolism in the body.”

To cool a flaming face, Ma customizes her Urban Renewal Facial with calming ingredients such as aloe vera juice, turmeric root and neem, combined with massage to tame stress-related inflammation. “This is not about simple vanity. We try to act as life coaches,” says Ma, who regularly checks in with Gittens on her diet (wine, dairy, caffeine and MSG are verboten), sun exposure and lifestyle. For Gittens, the proof is in the

mirror. “My skin is no longer dry and blotchy or greasy through the T-zone, and I hardly ever get acne.”

While Ma’s treatments include the comfortably familiar (exfoliation, extractions, Whole Foods–approved ingredients), you can also order up esoterica: facials with Ayurvedic marma therapy (which promises a fresher face by vibrating points on the body with a tapped tuning fork, to “help cleanse blocked energy around organs”), or chi nei tsang (a Taoist stomach massage that uses organ reflexology to spur detoxing and, thus, better skin).

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The allure of such arcane treatments could, in part, spring from science fatigue. With the ever-more-incredible claims made by high-tech beauty products—stem cells, gene boosters and multi-syllabic lab concoctions you can’t pronounce—there’s a noticeable counter trend of women wanting to try something perceived as more natural.

Stephen Gennaro, a cultural historian at Toronto’s York University, has a theory to explain it: During periods when technological advances happen quickly, society tends to seek consolation in ancient or spiritual ideas, he says. Take the turn of the last century, when Einstein’s theory of relativity, the Model T and wartime battle apparatuses were changing the world as we knew it; simultaneously, seances and theosophy (mystical philosophy) captured the public imagination. “Today we look to technology—cars, computers and smartphones—to make our lives easier,” says Gennaro, “but when they don’t fulfill all those promises, there tends to be a backlash to a more natural way of living and a longing for the past.” He adds that marketers are very savvy in the way they tap into the zeitgeist and draw out themes beneficial to their businesses. (Chi-ching!)

But something else is going on. Whereas New Age disciples were once stereotyped as Birkenstock-clad granola crunchers, today’s converts are professionals with book smarts, white collars and skyscraper heels—and the stresses that go hand in hand with overscheduled lives. As O’Grady tells it, her clients who slip into plush robes before presenting their chakras for tuning are only too relieved to share why they look and feel so depleted. These women, she adds, crave emotional support to go with a side of complexion coaxing.

All O’Grady knows is that the frazzled are knocking on her door for energy treatments such as “Spirit of the Forest”—which, yes, asks you to imagine you’re a tree. Alongside a guided meditation, Canadian tree “essences” formulated from juniper, hickory and elm are massaged into the skin to target some very contemporary stress triggers: “We have an essence for women >

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torn between being the main breadwinners in their family—so taking on very male roles—while, at the same time, being women and navigating cyclical female issues,” she explains. Then there are “essences” to treat the overweight and the broken-hearted.

It’s not just spa owners with car payments who are extolling the wonders of reiki, gems and acupuncture pricks. After studying biology and business, Julie McClure, 38, spent a decade working 70–100 hours a week in corporate finance in New York and Toronto while

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suffering 4–6 migraines a week, getting no relief from prescription drugs. She took a year off to search for her own cure, discovering yoga, acupuncture and naturopathic medicine.

Not only did acupuncture on her face and body help tame her intense headaches, McClure noticed lasting beauty benefits: “I no longer saw dark circles under my eyes from chronic migraines.” Today, she’s a repeat customer at the Four Seasons Spa, where she goes for their **Holistic Sapphire Gemstone Facial**. The first time, she detected the gem working on her third eye. “It was subtle, but I could feel the energy movements and patterns and found it very grounding and balancing,” says McClure, who never returned to finance and instead started BeNourished, a Toronto juice-cleanse company. “Gemstone therapy takes me to a calm, self-nurturing place. It’s up to me to carry that energy forward into the rest of my day.”

Then there are show-me-the-study doubters. “People who believe this stuff have lost scientific, objective think-

ing,” counters Dr. Fred Weksberg, owner of the Weksberg Centre for Cosmetic Dermatology in Toronto. While he acknowledges the link between acupuncture and pain relief (via the release of endorphins), he says there’s no scientific data to support cosmetic benefits. The needles might elicit a temporary circulation boost, he concedes, but he doubts it can spur collagen formation for wrinkle-smoothing. And the notion that acupuncture unblocks some kind of vital energy is “completely without any merit,” says Dr. Weksberg, who almost burst a blood vessel over the health and beauty claims of reiki and gemstones. “There is no such thing as a life force energy going through your palms,” he says, “or an electromagnetic effect from gems.” Similarly, he’s unconvinced that Ayurveda has any real effect in treating conditions such as rosacea and acne.

Lack of scientific proof may not matter to McClure or like-minded followers, but as a journalist-sleuth, I have to see the results at the spa first-hand. “You’re a tall cedar, swaying in the breeze and feeling the vibrations of Mother Earth,” coos one pro during my aromatic meditation and massage. I believe that’s skepticism radiating from my pores. Another practitioner uses two pink crystal wands to “heal my face.” Still, I close my eyes and opt to go with the flow. And I admit, I leave each energy treatment with a rosy radiance and more relaxed take on life. Whether that’s because these treatments channel the universal life force through me to dislodge chakra blocks, or because the products induce a slight irritation to kick up my colour, or because the reporter in me is happy to satisfy her curiosity—who can say?

I feel more luminous, so I probably look it. And the calm I experience after an acupuncture facial lasts for days. Believers such as McClure are willing to admit the placebo effect: Even if the treatments don’t work on the body, they can work on the mind, which affects the body. This belief in the unproven—crystals, energy and a little bit of magic—isn’t new, of course. “Women used to be burned at the stake for believing these sorts of things,” says Rosen. Now they just meet at the spa. □

GOOD VIBRATIONS

These alt-beauty lines promise the best of both worlds—skin-loving ingredients, plus a certain *je ne sais quoi* from enigmatic, holistic or spiritual extras.



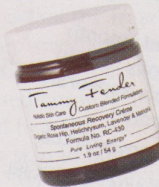
DR. HAUSCHKA grows medicinal plants by the rules of 1920s-era biodynamics, which follow precise sowing and harvesting times according to the rhythms of the cosmos—including the moon and planets—to get the most ingredient benefits and nurture the earth. **Melissa Day Cream, \$42.**

SJÄL, used for facials at the Mondrian South Beach hotel in Miami, infuses creams with “bio-osmotic energy” from chakra-balancing precious gems (such as sapphires), alongside more conventional skin helpers (including plant retinol). **Saphir Concentrate Anti-Aging Face Oil, \$200.**



AJNE, the natural perfumery/apothecary brand used for facials at the luxe Four Seasons Toronto, borrows inspiration from “ancient alchemical secrets”—namely, fragrant oils and healing botanicals, most grown on the small company farm in California. **Hydrating Facial Serum, \$55.**

TAMMY FENDER, a Gwyneth Paltrow favourite, promises solace for skin and spirit with “vibrational” ingredients: The helichrysum plant, for instance, is said to stimulate new cells while moving “stagnant chi.” **Spontaneous Recovery Creme, \$165.**



IN FIORE heals with aromatic flowers, homeopathic remedies and “high resonance water” (filtered using rare volcanic minerals), hand-blended into products adored by the chic set. Gwen Stefani’s hairstylist, Danilo (see his work on page 90), and street-style star Michelle Violy Harper refer to this eye cream as “eye crack.” **Vis Clair, \$68.**