

Beauty

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The clean beauty boom

A clutch of new, millennial-friendly labels are taking on the big beauty brands. The secret ingredient? Sustainability



Plenaire

“The sea inspires and drives me forwards every day,” says Dom Bridges, founder of the Margate-based natural skincare brand Haeckels. He is carrying a bucket brimming with slippery looking seaweed — the fruits of his coastal harvest — and the smell of it hangs in the air. “All our ingredients are sourced from this stretch of coastline. Our shop overlooks the sea. Our slogan ‘From the ocean, for the ocean’, is written on the windows of our store. This is where Haeckels began.”

The store — a tiny apothecary-style space bedecked in reclaimed oak panelling — opened in 2012, the year Bridges established the brand from his kitchen table. A beachcomber and volunteer warden, Bridges quit his job directing television ads for big skincare companies after becoming disillusioned with the way they were creating their ranges. His first product? A vegan bar of soap, made from Margate seaweed. “I wanted to bring craftsmanship and transparency to the table,” he says. “I wanted to create something that was an ambassador for this entire coastline.”

Haeckels is just one of a growing number of beauty brands with a focus on sustainable beauty. Austin Austin Organic makes shampoos and conditioners in East Anglia, while New York-based Kahina Giving Beauty and UK fragrance brand Sana Jardin both source their materials fairly through women's collectives in Morocco. Former Calvin Klein creative director Francisco Costa recently launched Costa Brazil, which harvests its oils from the Amazon rainforest.



Haeckels' Seaweed + Salicylic Powder Exfoliant, £27

Make-up brands, meanwhile, are increasingly going vegan and producing paraben-free products. Intent on targeting a younger, digitally savvy and ethically switched-on audience, these brands market themselves as “clean beauty”. The moniker is catchy and millennial-friendly, but it also exempts labels from the more rigorous process required to bring organically certified products to market. The cynical might say clean beauty is a marketing trick. But there’s a wealth of contenders entering the space. And they are fulfilling a growing demand.

Milk Makeup, born out of the renowned photography hub Milk Studios and based in New York, offers lip balms, mascaras and eyebrow products all made from hemp oil. The brand opened a neon-filled pop-up store in London’s Covent Garden last month: almost 5,000 teenagers queued to shop — and the wait-list for sold-out stock now numbers 17,000.



Milk Makeup © Daniel Thomas Smith

Meanwhile, the UK-based youth-centric brand Plenaire will soon launch with a range of blemish serums and hydrating masks in pretty pink formulas.

Founder Namrata Kamdar, who formerly worked in marketing for Coca-Cola and Pepsi, says the product range is free from petrochemicals, microbeads and silicones — and isn't tested on animals. These days, it's cool to be conscious.

“Clean eating and veganism have been major drivers in bringing awareness and demand towards sustainable, natural beauty,” says Anita Kaushal, founder of Mauli Rituals, which takes its root from the Indian medicinal practice, Ayurveda. Maria Lam, managing director of Wildsmith Skin, which launched last April, agrees. “Consumers today think about where our things come from, our impact as a whole and our legacy — we have come of age,” she says.



Going natural has its benefits. “Organic ingredients have flourished without synthetic pesticides or artificial chemical fertilisers so the quality is not compromised,” says Sarah Murrell, co-founder of the London-based By Sarah, which uses ingredients certified by the Soil Association. “Certified organic products are up to 60 per cent higher in antioxidants,” claims Bessie Austin, who co-founded Austin Austin Organic with her father, Richard, last year.

Sustainable beauty is by no means a mass enterprise. It takes four days to harvest the seeds from eight tonnes of fruit to obtain a litre of Kahina Giving Beauty’s Prickly Pear Seed Oil (\$150), while Sarah Craig, of the Canadian Penny Frances Apothecary, grows ingredients in her garden and makes her products in small batches at home. “This is what makes my products special,” says Craig, of her potions such as her bestselling black cumin eye butter (\$40), which is so popular it garners a wait-list. “The care. The time. The intimacy.”



Francisco Costa, meanwhile, has established links with non-profit Conservation International to source Costa Brazil's trio of oils that he calls his "jungle complex". "There is no other place I could have found these ingredients but the Amazon, the richest concentration of nature in the world," says Costa. "During my time at Calvin Klein, we promoted healthy looking skin, letting it shine. But I became acutely aware of this cycle of creation and consumption in fashion and beauty. Creating a small-batch brand felt not so much of a decision but a necessity to improve the waste cycle," he says. The brand's aesthetic is minimalist, harking back to Costa's days at Calvin Klein. "I wanted the packaging to feel like designed objects, and less disposable," he says of the sculptural glass bottles that reference the buildings of Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer.

Shelf appeal is vital — almost all of these brands use dark glass recyclable bottles that not only better preserve the contents, but look stylish in the bathroom cabinet. "I wanted to show that natural products can be as luxurious looking as any department store brand," says Katharine L'Heureux, founder of Kahina Giving Beauty, of her packaging that blends "Moroccan handwriting with a decidedly New York aesthetic."



Maui Rituals' Grow Strong Intensive Conditioner, £36

A combination of tasteful aesthetics and careful ethics have drawn in style-conscious consumers and buyers alike. In London, Austin Austin Organic is stocked at Alex Eagle, while Haeckels is available at End Clothing, Sana Jardin is stocked at Koibird, and Less — a purist three-product brand from Germany — is sold at Mouki Mou. “As an independent shop, we have never been interested in anything mass-produced — quality and rarity are what we pursue,” says Maria Lemos, founder of Mouki Mou.

Clean beauty has got a big potential market. Some 57 per cent of shoppers would buy – or boycott – a brand depending on its ethical values, according to Mintel – a figure up 20 per cent on the previous year. And the interests of the brands are beginning to reach beyond the bathroom. Bridges regularly hosts beach clear-ups of the Margate coastline, where volunteer combbers get a free Haeckels body wash in return for collecting waste plastics: international fans can clean their local beaches and receive a 40 per cent discount online.



Plenaire product range

For Bridges it's more than just a business. It's a mission. "We aren't jumping on a bandwagon, creating marketing or reacting to a TV show," he says. "We're a coastal-based skincare company. It is our absolute duty to protect it."

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