

Right now, a Norwegian nun is hand-mixing essential oils, an Andean farmer is harvesting wild roses, and a Sherpa is hiking a sack full of blue poppies down a narrow path in the Himalayas—all for the sake of your skin. Companies are going to great lengths to reinvent modern skin care, scouring the globe and charting the phases of the moon to bring pure, potent ingredients to your zip code.

“We harvest Pacific seaweed in the spring and fall during certain lunar cycles, when there are more minerals, vitamins, and salts for the cream,” says Andy Bevacqua, the executive director for research and development at La Mer. “We see a significant chemical variance in seaweed harvested during different times of the year.” The cream is, of course, La Mer, the famous cult creation of the late aerospace physicist Max Huber, a man with a definite understanding of lunar cycles. Huber’s patented seaweed-based Miracle Broth gets a starring role in La Mer’s latest, The Concentrate, an intensive treatment for scars, irritation from surgery, skin trauma, and chemical peels.

Rather than going 20,000 leagues under the sea, the Boston-based beauty company Fresh went back almost 2,000 years in search of the ultimate facial moisturizer. Fresh Crème Ancienne is based on the world’s first recorded face-cream recipe, transcribed in the second century by Marcus Aurelius’ personal doctor, Claudius Galenus. Fresh commissioned just 3,000 jars a year (each priced at \$250), hand-mixed by the nuns of the Cistercian Order on the island of Tautra, Norway. Galenus’ concoction was used to heal gladiator wounds and to moisturize aristocratic skin, but when it comes to treating wrinkles, Fresh cofounder Lev Glazman admits that he still prefers high-tech creations. “I believe technology is best for reversing the signs of age. But if you want a really emollient moisturizer, natural is better,” Glazman says.

For nonindustrialized communities around the world, natural ingredients are the *only* option. The Utah-based Nu Skin cosmetics dispatches “ethnobotanists” to study indigenous cultures and medicinal plants and to create new skin-friendly remedies. South Pacific fire walkers lent their expertise to develop FireWalker, a foot treatment that incorporates the same soothing Ti leaf extract applied after a stroll over the coals.

In the ultracompetitive beauty world, even mud must have a

pedigree. Fresh imports cosmetics-grade clay with a talclike texture from the Umbria region of Italy to use in everything from makeup to toothpaste. Umbria has serious rivals, including the Dead Sea, thermal springs in Hungary and Italy, and mineral-rich springs across the U.S. Since the only proven benefit of clay is to absorb oil, mud preference is an entirely subjective choice.

The scientists at Clearasil are biased, however. In the “My mud is better than your mud” debate, Steve Hewitt, MD, Clearasil’s medical adviser, contends that the brand’s green clay from the coast of British Columbia, found in the new Clearasil Total Control Purifying Green Clay Mask, holds a negative ionic charge that bonds to the “positively charged impurities on the skin’s surface.” Because of extreme weather, tidal patterns, and environmental restrictions, the mud can be harvested only during a 40-day period each year.

Another company that’s bound by Mother Nature’s calendar is Weleda, a homeopathic line based in Germany. The company adheres to the principles of biodynamic gardening, which is determined by lunar patterns and plant growth cycles. The company grows echinacea, calendula, and arnica in Germany and goes global to harvest other essential ingredients in their natural environments—no matter how inconvenient they may be. Weleda Wild Rose Body Lotion is no misnomer: The roses grow high on the hillsides of the Chilean Andes. Likewise, Yves Saint Laurent incorporates Himalayan



Snow business: Weleda’s wild roses flourish in the extreme Andean climate.

poppies, the only flora to flourish at an elevation of 15,000 feet, in its new Instant Pur line. Kanebo, a pricey Japanese brand, ventures to the northwestern highlands in China to pick the red fruit of the Kakyoku bush (a relative of the rose family) for an extract that helps skin defend itself against ultraviolet light. Each company hopes the same ingredients that make the fragile plants immune to extreme temperatures and the harsh high-altitude sun will make skin equally resilient.

But, counters Miami dermatologist Fredric Brandt, MD, it’s not quite that simple. “You can’t transfer what makes a plant healthy into a cream and expect it to automatically make skin healthy,” he says. However, Brandt, a fan of clinically proven old standards like topically applied vitamins A and C, does believe that some far-flung newcomers will prove themselves down the road. “Green tea was considered exotic just a few years ago, but now it’s a common, well-researched antioxidant. Of course, by the time studies show something to be effective, it may have lost its sex appeal.” □