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## Past Issues

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 Natural glow  
 Increasingly, Halifax's spas and salons are taking chemicals out of the quest for beauty

Lindsay Jones



**So you're not quite willing** to henna your hair over a rain barrel. But the idea of jabbing needles in your face gives you the shivers.

Fortunately, there's a growing middle ground for those who still want to be pampered while keeping it au naturel. That's the thinking at Be Well Spa on Robie Street and the other spas and salons that are starting to offer beauty services without synthetic chemicals, fumes and unpronounceable ingredients.

"There has to be somewhere in between women getting Botox, open to plastic surgery, having tons of chemically laden makeup and cosmetics on their faces and people who choose not to do a lot of personal hygiene and self-care stuff," says Cheryl Lycette, a naturopathic doctor in Halifax. That's who she was targetting when she and her husband Brian Nichols opened Be Well Spa on Robie Street about 18 months ago.

At their spa, the ingredient lists don't include parabens, petroleum products, harsh detergents, perfumes or chemicals like formaldehyde and toluene (found in most nail polishes) in any of the spa treatments. (Parabens are preservatives used in most cosmetics that Lycette says mimic estrogen in the body and have been linked to cancer and infertility.) The spa's Naturopathica product line features a blend of herbs, essential oils, and botanicals. Where possible, they use eco-friendly and local products.

Similar to Lycette, salon owner and stylist Kevan Bish is also carving a new path in Halifax with his ammonia-free highlights and line of homemade organic shampoos and conditioners. "When you use my shampoo [and] wash it from the body, you take your own biological bacteria and redeposit stuff the earth can use, as opposed to when you wash with regular shampoo, soap and shaving cream you are washing chemicals down the drain that destroy the environment," says Bish.

He's been in the business for 23 years, opening Swanki Guru in Purdy's Wharf five years ago. His clients include everyone from waitresses to businesswomen like Fiona Kirkpatrick Parsons. "As I get older, I'm really becoming much more aware that I'm quite vulnerable," says the 47-year-old communications manager for Trade Centre Limited. "If there are too many ingredients I can't pronounce I'm kind of less inclined to buy it—unless it's mascara that really kicks butt."

As Kian Holistic Clinic esthetician Crystal Acker explains, the demand for natural, organic products is part of a growing trend toward caring as much about what you're putting on your body as what you're putting in your mouth. "It's a real conversation piece for people," says the 29-year-old who has worked at the Bedford clinic since it opened a year ago. "They really like to know what's going on their skin."

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Part of the allure is watching Kian clinic owner, registered acupuncturist and herbalist Carolyn Lowe whip up spa products on the spot. She uses herbs, essential oils and common pantry ingredients like sugars and salts for body polishes, plus strawberries, bananas and oatmeal for masks. And clients respond. "When I'm doing the facials people say 'Mmmm smells good enough to eat,'" Acker says.

It's that sensory experience of smelling the herbs, vegetables and fruits jam-packed into the Hungarian Eminence organic skincare line that has kept people coming to Spirit Spa for the past seven years. For its growing clientele of well-groomed naturalists, the Hollis Street spa just introduced vegan pedis and manis. The services include Spa Ritual nail polish, which has no formaldehyde and toluene, acetone-free polish remover, and a paraben-free, organic French lavender organic sugar scrub. "Everyone is [becoming] more and more aware of being as natural as possible and leaving the least amount of an ecological footprint in the world," says Spirit Spa co-owner Linda Brigley. "The product industry is really responding to that."

But chemistry and environmental studies professor Philip Jessop, at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, has a warning. "Some people have a philosophical liking for organic farming and that sort of thing," says Jessop, who's also the Canada Research Chair in Green Chemistry. "That's fine, go ahead and buy those products, but don't feel that you're being any safer because of it. In my search to be environmentally conscious it is not good enough to try and mimic nature and say 'OK this solves the problem,' because nature is incredibly dangerous. Nature makes some of the most disastrous and nastiest compounds available. ...The word natural does not guarantee safety at all."

When comparing levels of toxicity, Jessop says toluene is actually three times safer than caffeine. He says ammonia can be toxic if inhaled all day long or if it gets into your blood stream. He takes the biggest issue with formaldehyde, considered to be harmful to human health under the Canadian Environmental Protection Act.

The American Environmental Protection Agency calls formaldehyde a "probable human carcinogen." Health Canada restricts its use in cosmetics but says it doesn't pose a risk when used according to those specifications. "I generally think that we should be trying to avoid formaldehyde in consumer products where possible..." Jessop says. "But that is with the proviso that we have to check what the replacement is first and make sure it's not just as bad or worse."

Health Canada doesn't restrict the use of parabens in cosmetics because it doesn't deem them a health risk in the concentrations used in cosmetics (generally less than 0.3 per cent), according to spokesman Gary Holub. Still, the agency continues to monitor scientific data on parabens. Health Canada also has several ongoing studies looking at whether certain substances or cosmetic products, including hair dyes, pose potential health or safety risks.

Peter Vignjevic, a dermatologist and assistant professor of medicine in the medical school at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, says cosmetics without parabens and formaldehyde are a great benefit to people with sensitivities and allergies, but there's no reason why we all should avoid them. "I use sunscreen with parabens," Vignjevic says. "If they definitely cause cancer and it was well-documented they wouldn't be available."

But Lycette and her growing list of customers won't take the chance. "I am vain like everyone else," Lycette says. "I fully understand that you want to slow down the aging process as much as possible, but I can't do that at the expense of 'Well, what does that cost me down the road?'"

Learn more Health Canada publishes the Cosmetic Ingredient Hotlist of restricted and prohibited substances in cosmetics in Canada. Check it out at [www.hc-sc.gc.ca](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca). For more about the toxicity and carcinogenicity of various chemicals, surf to [www.epa.gov/iris](http://www.epa.gov/iris) or [ntp.niehs.nih.gov](http://ntp.niehs.nih.gov).



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