From naughty to natural: Edible cosmetics

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Food-based beauty brands, once a novelty for kinky couples, are providing nourishment for the naturals trend.

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While "natural" is appearing on product labels with increasing frequency, there is no agreement about how the term should be defined and therefore what products can legitimately use it. Using food-grade ingredients circumvents potential consumer scepticism about a product's naturalness, and also enables manufacturers to take advantage of the known health and beauty benefits of fruits and vegetables.

Looking good enough to eat
Edible cosmetics have appeared at a time when homemade beauty remedies are growing in popularity as a natural and cost-effective alternative to expensive, synthetic cosmetics. UK supermarket chain Asda claims shoppers are spending millions of pounds a year on making alternative skin and hair care treatments. While perhaps not offering the equivalent cost efficiencies, food-based beauty brands do have the advantage of convenience and a longer shelf-life.

Advanced Formulations is just one of the niche beauty providers pioneering the cosmetics craze. The UK beauty firm has created a line of organic skin care products using food-grade ingredients called NOe Cosmetics, with "NOe" standing for "natural, organic, edible". Skin Food's "almost edible" skin, body and hair care and colour cosmetics products have proven so successful in its home market of South Korea, the retailer has expanded into neighbouring Asia-Pacific markets, including Singapore. Meanwhile, food giant NestlÃ© is bringing the natural moisturising properties of yoghurt to the beauty industry. With world-leading yoghurt brands worth US$1.8 billion annually, NestlÃ© is now enhancing the dairy product with collagen to create a rejuvenating day/night skin treatment. The fad for food-based beauty has been tipped to become so widespread some makers of bathroom equipment are starting to install small refrigerators in bathrooms to keep brands fresh.

Tapping into a buffet of trends
Edible cosmetics also have the potential to tap into an array of complementary trends, expanding their consumer appeal. Like Australia's Inika cosmetics, a range of natural mineral cosmetics suitable for vegans which are selling strongly across Australasia, the UK and the US, food-based brands can target consumers with special dietary requirements. Besides vegan formulations, there is also scope for developing halal or kosher products or ones entirely based on organic ingredients. They can also benefit from consumer fads for exotic "super foods", such as antioxidant-rich pomegranates. Tahitian Noni International began as a marketer of juice from the energy-giving, immunity-boosting noni. Ten years later and the US-based firm sells an extensive range of noni-based skin and hair care.

Food-based beauty products could also be a useful tool in attracting the large and growing pool of older consumers. Unlike their younger, more adventurous peers, the over-60s like to keep things simple; they want to be able to identify all of the ingredients on a label and make judgements about the product's efficacy based on what they know about those ingredients and their health and beauty benefits. Cosmetics and toiletries based on common health foods could therefore provide just the answer. French-based Caudalie has sold well amongst this group, capitalising on the known antioxidant properties of grapes to offer a complete ranges of anti-ageing skin care. EstÃ©e Lauder's Origins, which saw sales of US$165 million in its core, US, market last year, has similar appeal with the over-65s, with white tea being its key anti-ageing ingredient.

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