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the game changer

beyond moisturizer

A new wave of lotions and potions claim to be able to transform your skin, but can we believe the hype? *Kathleen Baird-Murray* separates the science from the spin and works out how to choose a super cream

In the last 48 hours I've interviewed two chemists, one facialist, one skincare brand founder and one former knee surgeon. Each has launched a new moisturizer with an entirely innovative approach to tackling skin health. All have at some point asserted that theirs is the best, the most efficacious, the most pure and luxurious, with a unique selling point. Their hyperbole comes from the heart; their science is well tested. They have statistics, before and after pictures, even touching anecdotes about how bad their skin used to be until they created... this! At which point, a box with a ribbon and a pot or a bottle of something magical is revealed, and I can't wait to get home and try out the potent serum contained within.

Admittedly, these are business people with a line to sell, and the dark deeds of the erstwhile snake-oil practitioner touting miracle cures have haunted the beauty industry for centuries, so we are wary, wisely so. But far from being a case of "buyer beware", there is an important difference today. Underlying each robust pitch is a genuine wish to make your skin the best it can be. Scientific innovation, coupled with an imaginative use of what already exists means that skincare brands now have the ways, so long as you have the means.

Faced with a daunting 300 moisturizers to choose from (the current offering from Net-A-Porter, for example) or flanked with 17 beauty

counters as you walk into Bergdorf Goodman, the consumer is in a powerful position. But with more choice than ever before, how do you find the dream cream for your skin? Here's how to decipher the science from the marketing spin, wise up to the pressures of the hard sell, and enjoy navigating the most competitive market of all.

From comfort to high performance

Using a basic but good quality moisturizer has somehow become a part of our subconscious routine—essential, comforting, something we apply almost without thinking. It makes the skin feel supple, enables makeup to glide on more smoothly; its scent, whether natural or artificial, provides a familiar, occasionally nostalgic, anchor, setting you up for the day, putting you to bed at night. But the basics – the Niveas of this world – while being an essential fallback option can't do much more than that. "If you just want moisturization, that's the easiest thing in the world, it's a drop of glycerin or petroleum jelly," says Sunday Riley, founder of her eponymous skincare brand. "But if you want to get rid of deep lines and wrinkles, or hyperpigmentation, a good base alone isn't going to do that."

Enter the so-called "actives" – the materials that potentially move the humble moisturizer onto bigger, better things. From

hyaluronic acid, which makes our skin look plumper thanks to its ability to hold water to AHAs (alpha hydroxy acids and their beta associates), which give a more youthful appearance to the skin by removing dead skin cells; to retinol, or retinoic acid, which has been proven to fade age spots and fine lines over time; or the ever-popular antioxidants, which repair damaged skin and allow our healthy cells to proliferate, actives have transformed modern skincare. A good moisturizer will balance a combination of these high-strength substances with soothing, anti-inflammatory ingredients – and a good user will make sure she wears a sunscreen, as highly potent actives like retinol, AHAs and some antioxidants can react with the sun to cause skin sensitivity.

Beware the spiel

Actives come with a free sample of hype – the kind of marketing spin that elevates a dusting of copper or ordinary lump of tree bark to the levels of miracle-maker, game-changer, cure-all. "Modern women can see through marketing, they're not interested in claims because they know it's just stupid," says Dr Barbara Sturm, a Dusseldorf-based aesthetic and cosmetic specialist with her own line of skincare. "Women want something that goes into the skin, gives it a nice glow and makes pores look smaller." >



THE ONE-MINUTE RULE

According to skincare companies, radiance is the most-requested result for any moisturizer. Taking a minute before makeup application to massage the skin with a much-loved cream, will boost circulation and restore a glow to the most tired-looking complexions. Try the protein-rich Crema Nera Extrema, £315, by Giorgio Armani or Le Lift Recontouring Massage Mask, £60, by Chanel, with neroli-extract for micro-circulation.

Flash Lacquer Lip Gloss in 510, £25.50, by Giorgio Armani

Top by Chloé, £1,305, and ear cuff by Anita Ko, £520, both at Net-A-Porter.com
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Boasts of higher quantities of any one active over another are meaningless. "There are a lot of amazing actives out there," says Riley, giving the example of resveratrol, found in the skin of red grapes as one of the most "phenomenal" antioxidants. "But when companies talk about 'resveratrol extract' you have no way of knowing whether it's a drop within the equivalent of a swimming pool's worth of water, or a 50:50 ratio. If the extract entered in the form of a powder rather than a liquid, it is often a lot stronger, but again, this is not something you will learn from the label." Nor is it true to say that the more different types of active you have, the better the product.

Equally, how effective the active will be depends on the quality and provenance of the source used – that doesn't necessarily mean expensive skincare, but it does mean trusting that the brand you buy has done its due diligence. Dr Simon Jackson, who tests the natural actives he uses in his skincare brand in a Swiss laboratory, bemoans the lack of checks on what he calls "kitchen-sink naturals", those natural brands that remind you of the honey face mask you used to make in your teens. "When you're sourcing natural ingredients you have to be sure you are buying a pure plant compound.

It's not uncommon for active ingredients like licorice (which has a compound called glycyrrhizin making it six times sweeter than sucrose) to be laced with heavy metals like lead, arsenic and mercury, all of which can be very dangerous."

New buzzwords that deserve our attention

PURSLANE, a highly potent antioxidant said to increase the body's production of telomerase (key to keeping cells replicating). Try: Hyaluronic Acid Ampoules by Dr Barbara Sturm, £132, at Net-A-Porter.com which blend this powerhouse with moisturizing hyaluronic acid in a glass capsule for easy application.

HYLOSOME, which has five times the water-binding capacity of hyaluronic acid, Try: Peptide Infused Antioxidant Serum by Radical Skincare, £125, at Net-A-Porter.com which is highly moisturizing as well as reparative.

BAOBAB, with more calcium than two pints of milk and more vitamin C than six oranges, it is found in almost all Dr Jackson's products. Try: Face & Eye Essence by Dr Jackson's, £60, at Net-A-Porter.com – great for fine lines.

TRANS-RETINYL ESTER, which has been shown to have the same effects of retinol (minimizing pores, building collagen) but without some of the side-effects (redness, peeling or itching). Try: Luna Sleeping Night Oil, £85, by Sunday Riley, which contains this, as well as avocado, grapeseed and chia oils to restore skin overnight.

Like for like

When it comes to matching your moisturizer with a serum or even the rest of your skincare routine, it pays to consider the potential synergy of products alongside each other – some act as boosters, other combinations should be avoided altogether. How can you tell? It's not always easy.

If you have a particular skin concern, like pigmentation or acne, make life easier and buy from within the same brand. Otherwise, observe these golden rules from Radical Skincare's lead chemist, the industry-renowned Lionel De Benetti:

AVOID following a vitamin C product (also

known as ascorbic acid) with anything containing copper (a key anti-inflammatory and reparative ingredient) because they activate each other. "Vitamin C is fragile and easily oxidized," says De Benetti.

"ALPHA HYDROXYL ACIDS (glycolic, malic, lactic) or beta hydroxyl acids (salicylic – found in blemish treatments) must not be combined with other acid ingredients like vitamin C or retinol, because of risk of skin irritation."

PRODUCTS with sugars should not be combined with anything collagen-based. "Glycation (when a sugar molecule sticks to proteins of the skin, accelerating skin aging) is one of the problems against which good skincare needs to fight, so be sure to rinse off any sugar-based exfoliants before applying moisturizers."

IF you're using a retinol product, always apply at night and wear a sunscreen the next day. Retinol thins the skin, making it more susceptible to burning. Equally, avoid exfoliating before sun exposure. "It weakens the stratum corneum, which absorbs the aggressive UV rays," says De Benetti.

Tried, tested, trusted

How do you know your chosen moisturizer with its star actives will actually do anything? "It's really about having a trusted relationship with the brand you choose, and saying, 'Do I see results?' and the answer has to be a firm yes or no," says Riley, who adds that it is easier to see the effectiveness of a cream on skin concerns like acne as opposed to fine lines, which can take longer. While this is frustrating for those who like their skincare to be backed with solid statistics, knowing how something works on your skin (not your best friend's) is in fact the only sensible way.

"People need to make up their own minds," says Dr Jackson. "There is very little scientific proof in the world of skincare, and even with tests, you have to ask yourself, who is paying for them, how useful are they?" Riley agrees: "Even with Human Repeat Insult Patch Tests, where you apply the solution to be tested

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face-lift
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on your shoulder and stick a patch on top then check 24 hours later, labs can swing the results depending on the time of year, as skin is more or less irritable according to the seasons." It comes down to you. Look for brands that promote detail. Dr Jackson says: "We are empowering our customers to make their own decisions."

Safety is another issue – is the product properly preserved? There has been much scaremongering of late over preservatives and whether or not we need them. Riley tells the story of how she once tested a new laboratory sample of mascara that unbeknown to her wasn't preserved. "The next day I had a headache and my eyes were pouring. My doctor took one look and isolated me for seven days – a bacteria had eaten a hole in my eye and created a corneal ulcer. If I'd developed it in the pupil of my eye, I'd have lost my sight. So when people tell me they're wary of preservatives, I say, 'Trust me, you need them.'"

Now enjoy

Whatever your chosen cream, serum or oil, apply it with love; it's like talking to a plant – those who do are convinced it makes them grow better. Facialist Amanda Lacey likes to apply her Camellia Face Oil at night, putting a couple of drops in her hand, rubbing them together, then breathing in deeply and inhaling the oil, before massaging it into the skin. It exfoliates the skin and the natural lavender helps her sleep. In the morning, to help clear sinuses she applies two fingers on each side of the nose, drawing them out towards the lymph nodes, which are behind and in front of the ear. "It helps you to breathe properly and reduce puffiness."

How can you tell how much to use? Always use as needed; if your skin still feels oily by the time you put your head on the pillow, then you've put on too much. Equally, in the mornings, if you don't feel you need any, move straight on to sunscreen.

And in case you're one of those people who throws away the boxes, then can't remember what you're meant to do with each product, the order is easy: always apply the most active product first, and then the more moisturizing things on afterwards as a 'seal'. It really is that simple. ■

Cleanse, tone and moisturize

For generations women have religiously followed a three-step beauty regime. Today, while the routine stays true to these simple steps, there are some important add-ons. Choose from the following products depending on your skin type...

1. Cleanse

Aim for the cleanser that removes makeup with the gentlest impact.

SOAP & WATER CLEANSER: Sea Mud Deep Cleansing Bar by Erno Laszlo, £45, at Net-A-Porter.com

CLOTH CLEANSER: Miracle Cleanser by Aurelia Probiotic Skincare, £34, at Net-A-Porter.com

LIQUID CLEANSER: Lait-Crème Concentré by Embryolisse, £13, at Net-A-Porter.com



2. The Scrub

Choose either a gentle mechanical scrub (a cream with granular particles – avoid anything with plastic beads), used as much as skin can withstand, or a chemical exfoliant, used daily.

MECHANICAL: Regenerating Cleanser by Tata Harper, £49, at Net-A-Porter.com

CHEMICAL: Age-Defying Exfoliating Pads by Radical Skincare, £65, at Net-A-Porter.com



3. The Mask

Used as needed, a mask can give an instant boost to skin quality, and the therapeutic effects of taking a few minutes out of the day to relax are second to none.

DEEP CLEANSE: Goddess Clay Mask by Charlotte Tilbury, £45, at Net-A-Porter.com

HYDRATE: Hydrating Facial by Crème de la Mer, £195

PEEL: Copper Peel by Omorovicza, £82 at Net-A-Porter.com



4. Tone (Optional)

"Some people say toners are passé, others love their ability to remove very thick cleanser," says Sylvie Chantecaille, who thinks of them as a non-essential luxury that she nonetheless wouldn't be without.

"I love the moisturizing benefits of our toner, but most of all I love the happy feeling that it bathes you in." Pure Rosewater by Chantecaille, £50, at Net-A-Porter.com



5. Treat (Optional)

Adding an antioxidant-rich serum to hydrate or address any specific concerns can dramatically improve texture over time.

SUPER SERUM: Skin Renewal Booster by Elizabeth Arden, £45

POWERHOUSE: Extra Rich Cream by 37 Actives, £245, at Net-A-Porter.com

WONDER SERUM: Cellularose Hydradiance by By Terry, £75, at Net-A-Porter.com



6. Seal

Finish your beauty regime with one of the following truly luxurious oils or cream moisturizers for comfort, joy, and that seal of approval.

DAILY DOSE: Ecological Compound by Sisley, £144
CREAM: Crema Nera Extrema by Giorgio Armani, £315
NIGHT OIL: Camellia Oil by Amanda Lacey, £103

