

SKINCARE

1 JULY 2012

THE FIVE STAR FACE

CAN SKINCARE CREAMS REALLY BEAT BOTOX AND FILLERS? KATE SPICER GIVES UP THE NEEDLES AND TESTS A £25,000 BESPOKE SERVICE TO FIND OUT

THE SUNDAY TIMES

Madame Josette Allouche is 79. Her hair is dyed ash-blonde, but there is nothing fake about her skin. She is not wearing any make-up, yet her skin is smooth and toned, with a healthy bloom.

"Never the Botox! Never the fillers! Never the scalpel!" she says. In her Barbara Bui bouclé suit and diamonds, Madame is a strict advocate and ambassador for highly tuned and diligent skincare. With her late biologist husband, Yvan, she founded the French skincare brand Biologique Recherche in 1976. Today her son, Philippe, runs the company. At 14, he was in the family's lab, extracting vitamins from yeasts for skin creams, and by 17 was helping his father process human placentas for serums. At the extreme end of the product range is the six-month "haute couture" service — a bespoke skincare range that is put together for the client's specific requirements and changes monthly. It costs £25,000.

Allouche asks that I do not use Botox, fillers, peels or, indeed, any other skincare products for the six months, so he can read my skin's progress most efficiently. (He does say I can have a little filler in my lips to stop me looking crumpled, so he's not a needle-free purist.) I have monthly facials in a cool room, because he does not like the effect of warmth on the skin. My skin's sebum, elastin, pigmentation and thickness are measured with lab-standard equipment. The six-strong Biologique Recherche clinical team analyses the data and has a monthly debate that can last "between 15 minutes and an hour" about how best to treat my skin with topical products. Allouche has the final say. His work is based on "empirical data, previous client satisfaction and my experience and instinct".

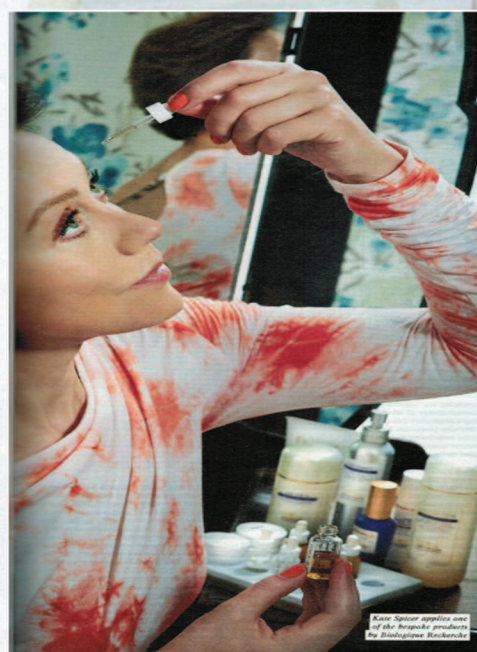
There are nine products, five of them bespoke, which take about 20 minutes a day to apply. Their specificity to me is clear from the codes on the tiny labels — SH12G01, SF12G01 and CR22G01 — and the Mme Spicer that is handwritten on every phial. Allouche says he dislikes expressions such as wonder creams, and describes many of the beauty industry's claims as "an 'uge lie". He also believes modern skincare is superior to cosmetic medicine, and says: "I am all about the bioengineering of skin." By which he means encouraging the skin to improve by itself. He is anti "anti-ageing", "because it is impossible".

The price of this skincare means that, so far, only 50 Chinese and Russian customers have signed up — that £25,000 price tag makes the job route look cheap. Still, those Botox headaches are a headache, and there aren't enough cosmetic doctors doing subtle work to make it the most credible route to turning back the clock.

So, how is my skin? It has a noticeably finer texture, with smaller pores, and, after a good night's sleep, looks like real rich-girl skin. On rich-girl-skin days, it is hard to wear make-up. After one week, someone says: "Your skin looks good — it's not grey, like most Londoners." After four months, there is modest firming and plumping. Someone asks me if I've had a facelift. I say, "No, it cost far more than surgery."

Allouche claims that, after six months, several of my many "problems" will be permanently fixed. Brutally, he points out that I have weak muscles in my face, and says I should do exercises. (Eva Fraser has been marketing her Facial Fitness technique, at £170 for 90 minutes, as a preferable option to surgery for decades.) The key to natural beauty, then, is heaps of money and time. Like an ostrich-skin Birkin bag, this skincare could be viewed as an investment. The effects are pleasing. I suspect daily application is key. One night off the special skin sauce and the rich-girl gleam is fading. I'm trying not to get too attached to it.

After three years of regular visits, I haven't been to a cosmetic doctor for jabs for more than a year. The effects of the Biologique Recherche regime are similar to the Dracula treatment, where your plasma is injected into the face. At £550 every six months, though, Dracula is cheaper. Yet ritual care of the skin must surely be preferable. Given unlimited cash, time and vanity, the "haute couture" treatment does produce good results, but I would still want occasional Botox and fillers from someone who is light on the needle. Ironic, isn't it, that the most natural effect costs the most money? In comparison, surgery looks cheap in every sense of the word. Of course, the effect is not as drastically different as surgery, but since when was drastically different equivalent to good? ●



Kate Spicer applies one of the bespoke products by Biologique Recherche

BACK TO BASICS

Here is Madame Allouche's guide to rich skin for poor people

- 1 Gently clean the skin twice a day.
- 2 Never choose products that are agreeable to the senses. Whatever product you use, choose one without perfume or colour — they should be nice and simple.
- 3 Find the most concentrated products: the active ingredient should be in high proportion to other simple ingredients. Buy products from people who know what they are talking about.
- 4 Use a mask as often as possible.
- 5 When applying, you should always sweep up and outwards with a light touch, not in circular motions or with strong rubbing movements.