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BEAUTY

An organic glow

Think there's nothing natural about spray-on tans? Think again.

By Lucy Boyle, Special to The Times

September 23, 2007

I'M standing in the airbrushing studio at Chocolate Sun in Santa Monica, braced for the cold chemical blast of a spray-on tan. Usually I'm wearing a paper shower cap, a mouth filter and plastic goggles, feeling like I'm some new breed of half-naked chemical warrior. This time, I'm wearing only the shower cap. And when the blast does hit, what I inhale doesn't smell like it could kill dolphins.

That's because this time, I'm at one of the few organic spray-tan salons, places that contend they're safer than traditional salons. That may or may not be true, but it's undebatable that at least they smell a whole lot better.

Of course, any spray-tan is infinitely safer than exposing your skin to UV rays. "Spray-tans are very safe, and whether it's organic may not make a difference," says Dr. Daniel Behroozan, clinical instructor of dermatology and dermatologic surgery at the UCLA School of Medicine.

Still, some experts contend that organic tanning is the best choice considering possible carcinogenic effects of parabens -- the preservatives found in many tanning solutions. "There is a legitimate concern about these types of chemicals, so choosing organic products as much as possible is the way to go," says Dr. Brian Durie, oncologist and chairman of the International Myeloma Foundation. "There is a plausible risk."

Although New York, Seattle and London are among cities with organic tanning spots, Chocolate Sun is the only L.A.-area tanning studio offering its own organic solution. Owner Susie Hatton worked with a botanical chemist to come up with her company's tanning formula in 2002 and has been offering the airbrushed organic tan since.

Though the active ingredient, DHA (dihydroxyacetone), is the same as in traditional tanning solutions, Chocolate Sun uses organically sourced DHA derived from the sugar of a beet. The other ingredients that help the solution absorb into the skin and stay there are "organic, natural, and wild-crafted botanicals, herbs and anti-oxidants," Hatton says. In other words, they are free of the harsh chemicals and preservatives that can make you wonder about spray-tanning's safety.

Because my skin is whiter than Martha Stewart's after five months in prison, I decided to try the Chocolate Sun tan myself. I'm a veteran of the spray-tanning booth and wanted to see if this newfangled organic tan would feel different.

From the moment I walked into Chocolate Sun's serene space, it was a much more pleasant experience than salons I'd visited before. Kimmie Worley, a part-owner and the technician working that day, offered dark-chocolate almonds and organic lip balm before my \$55 tan was applied. She explained the process and asked what level of tan I wanted. I decided on a notch above natural glow, just to be on the safe side.

Inside the utilitarian airbrushing studio, I removed most of my clothes, although you do have the choice of baring it all to avoid tan lines. Worley explained the various positions I would need to hold during the airbrushing to get the spray on evenly. The only pose I

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found awkward was sticking both thumbs up in front of me, which made me feel like a semi-nude Roger Ebert. Fortunately, I got used to it quickly.

My 15-minute visit was more satisfying than a trip to a regular spray salon. The tan lasted a bit longer -- a good week -- and faded evenly. The color looked natural with no telltale fake-tan orange. Though the jury may be out on the relative safety of organic spray-tanning, there's no question about the results for anyone searching for their outer George Hamilton.

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