



THE MASK: WHAT WOMAN DOESN'T HOLD OUT HOPE FOR PERFECT SKIN?

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How has celebrity facialist Simone France managed to remain underground? Amy Astley meets Manhattan's last beauty secret.

are there any beauty secrets left in New York? A hairstylist without a six-week wait list? A manicurist you can book on a moment's notice? An underground genius, someone whose name is passed only by whispered hints among an elite circle of insiders?

Not too many. And I'm about to ruin one of them.

"Please don't write about Simone!" one of her longtime clients jokingly beseeches me. "You are going to make my life hell!"

"Don't tell who goes to her!" threatens another, justifiably concerned that publication of facialist Simone France's impressive clientele will attract trendy types.

But I can't resist.

Amber Valletta ("glorious skin!") and Kirsty Hume and Shalom Harlow. ("The models come and go," France says, shrugging philosophically.) Cindy Crawford and Linda Evangelista. ("Oh, I haven't seen those girls in a while," she says. "All those Elite models came through the former director of the agency, Annie Veltri. She's still a client.") Vendela, Elle, and Veruschka. ("They all came for years.

still buys my products, but she's long overdue for a facial!"). Makeup artists Sonia Kashuk and Sue Devitt, who swear by France's facial technique and her products and selectively refer friends to her. ("Simone's not for everyone," warns Devitt. "She's exceptional. She's serious, not for people looking for a social scene.")

Simone France has been giving facials—not just any facial but her own trademark one—for more than 40 years. Her business was built entirely on word of mouth in the beauty and fashion industries. She is 71 years old, a five-foot French Colette look-alike in a white lab coat with fiery red hair and matching red lips. And no wrinkles.

"Simone hasn't changed her approach in the seventeen years I've been visiting her," says Frauke, a former model, now a photographers' agent in New York. "Simone's her own best advertisement. Have you seen her skin?"

"Oh, Simone's techniques are definitely effective," says Laura Mercier, makeup artist to the likes of Madonna and Celine Dion and a woman with her own skin-care line. "She was ahead of her time with her emphasis on exfoliation. But the proof is Simone herself. Have you seen her skin?"

by Amy Astley

"Simone is 71, but she is such a progressive thinker. She's passionate about skin care," says Devitt. "And she looks amazing." Pause. "Have you seen her skin?"

I have seen her skin, and it is astonishing: plump, radiant, smooth, with gentle expression lines around her eyes. So what is it, I ask Mme. France, that has devotees so, well, devoted? And is this the secret to her own lovely dermis?

"Listen," she says. "People don't know how to clean their skin. If your skin is too oily or too dry or too sensitive, it's usually caused by improper cleaning. If you learn to clean the skin correctly, the problem almost always corrects itself. I've never met a complexion I couldn't improve."

France believes in using soap in the morning: "Now it's fashionable to say soap is no good, but it's the best cleansing agent; you can't beat it." And she advocates a daily cleansing system using her own products, which she calls the Simone France Sandwich. This is a layer of moisturizer, followed by an application of Refining Scrub, topped off with a lathering of special soap. You massage the whole concoction into the skin and remove it with a damp gauze pad. (France is adamant about this: "Just splashing is not enough!") This is followed by fifteen splashes of warm water and then fifteen splashes of cold water.

"If you follow this regimen at home," claims France, "you won't need a facial with me more than once a month—or even less frequently. It's not about the facial, anyway; it's about the at-home maintenance of your skin." The regimen works, she says, because the first step, the moisturizer, softens dead cells and protects skin from the drying aspects of the cleansing. The scrub exfoliates. And the soap—well, the soap cleans it all off without drying, thanks to the cream. "It sounds complicated," Frauke says. "But it's easy, and it works."

France's motto? "What you remove from the skin is so much more important than what you put on." She explains, "You know, women think their skin is dry, and they overload it with creams that they never really clean off, and they don't exfoliate, and their skin looks worse and worse. Or they think it is oily, and they overdry the surface, and then impurities build up under a coarse surface and..." She sighs, discouraged. "It's a vicious cycle."

The Simone France line is fairly streamlined, with most products suitable for all skins: Instant Radiance, an exfoliant; Cleansing Milk and Soap; Gentle Toner; Line Minimizer for dry skin; two moisturizers; Oil Control Lotion; Blemish Erase; and a Refining Scrub.

She cheerfully espouses many theories guaranteed to make her an enemy of the beauty industry: For example, she warns me against using eye cream, especially at night. "It makes every one puffy in the morning," she asserts. And—although my skin immediately glowed and really seemed to thrive under her system—I admit I sorely missed my little pots and tubes of eye treatment. France grudgingly permits it for daytime use but stands her ground by refusing to create an eye product herself.

A facial with France is a lengthy affair; mine lasted two hours ("I can pick; you can't!" she chuckled gleefully). And newcomers should be forewarned that a basic treatment (\$110) includes price-less running commentary—lots of it. In the course of my facial, I



VIVE LA FRANCE! THE THREE ELEMENTS OF THE "SIMONE FRANCE SANDWICH": LEFT, FLAWLESS-SKINNED FANS AMBER VALLETTA, SHALYN HARLOW, AND MISTRY HUME; ABOVE FROM LEFT,

learn that a few things France simply cannot abide are plastic surgery ("face mutilation!"), Botox and

collagen ("creepy!"), and Helen Gurley Brown. ("That pulled face! Those skirts to the crotch! Showing the upper arms! My God! She must be 75 years old! Why does she want to be sexy? It's so vulgar! There's more to life than being young. Women like that—I cannot do anything for them.")

France works alone. No assistant, not even a receptionist to answer the phone, which rings twice during my facial in her humble two-room office in an unassuming East Fifty-eighth Street walk-up. "Some people are snobs; they want a fancy spa for their facial," she sniffs. "But I don't want those people. I believe in the value of skin care, not trendiness."

(She can't resist adding a zinger: "My clients who are truly famous, not just wishing to be famous, appreciate the anonymity here. They come and go without makeup. They are pleased that there is no staff to tell the tabloids what they've been doing.")

Clients like Frauke, the photographers' agent, worry that no one has been trained by France to carry on her tradition. The very idea makes France shudder. "All these 25-year-old cosmetologists with long nails! I would love to teach someone, but they don't want to learn; they think they know everything!" France tells me she's actually going to start "cutting down on facials"—but I have a feeling she's been threatening this for years.

Ultimately, it is France's uncompromising individuality that has kept her from exploding from underground phenom to the mainstream popularity other esteemed Manhattan beauty pros enjoy. The experience is so private, so intimate, that if France is not your style—or you are not hers—the relationship is doomed.

I left France convinced that the Simone France Sandwich was the fountain of youth; after all, look at her own much-admired visage, right? But France had some revealing parting words for me: "No sun! I walk all over New York under my little Chinese umbrella." □

Simone France products (from \$12 to \$60) are available at www.simonefrance.com or by calling (877) 746-6633.

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