

THIS ISSUE FOR THE NEXT BIG THING

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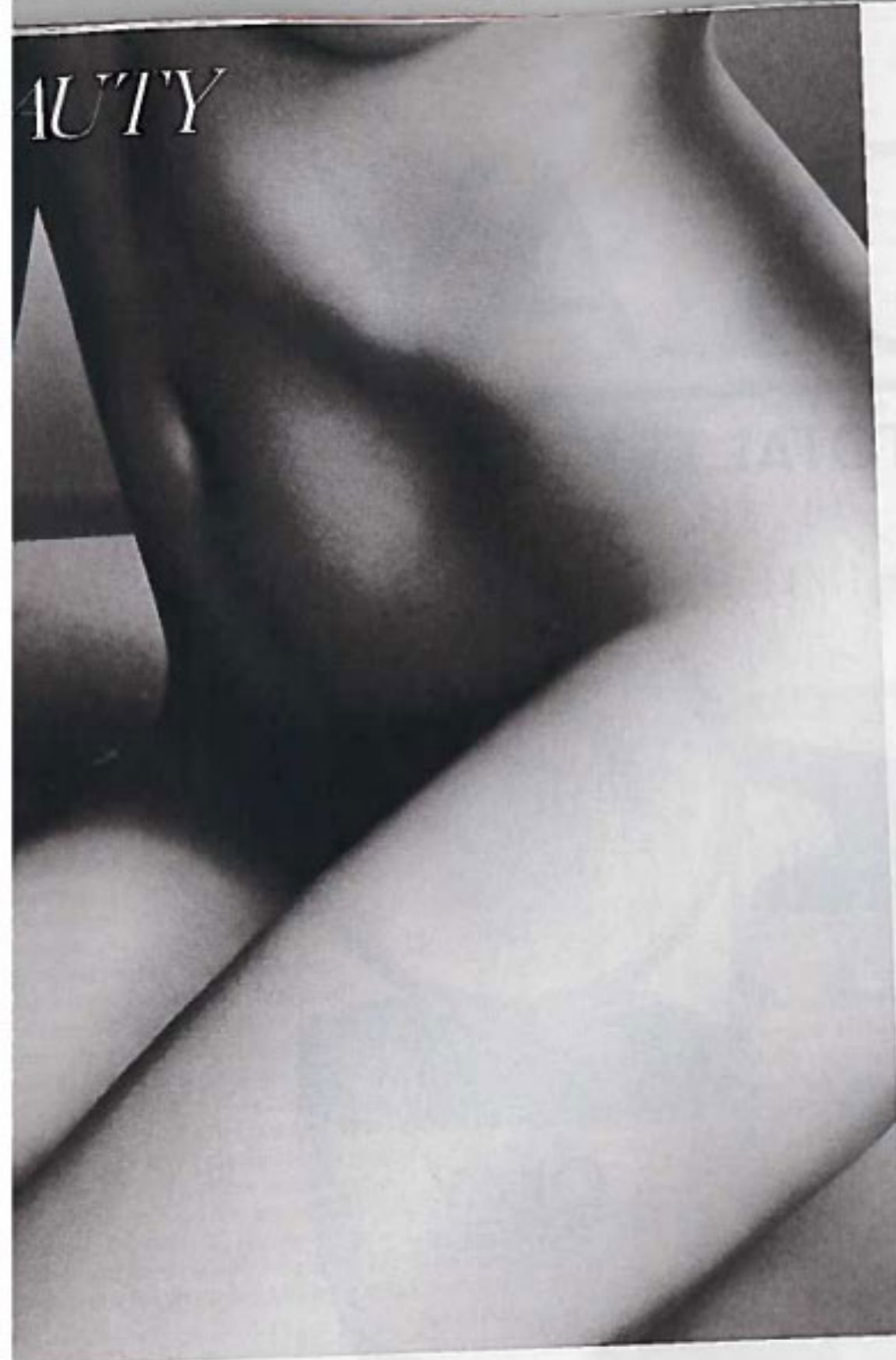
marie claire

BEAUTY REPORT

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TARAJI
P. HENSON
SEXY, BADASS & BRAVE
By Janet Mock



at a recent dinner party with a group of girlfriends in L.A., I decided to shake things up when someone casually asked what was new with me. "Well, I've been oiling my pubic hair for a week now," I said across the table. A fork clattered against china, and a hovering male server sidled away fast. The woman next to me cringed, revealing a fleck of salad in her teeth. But once the initial shock wore off, everyone leaned in to hear more about my new south-of-the-border beauty regimen. And several women shared vagina-beautification stories of their own. As I walked to my car at the end of the night, one friend shouted, "Loooved the pubes talk?"

Feminine care, it seems, is now fair game for dinner discussion. Part of that probably has to do with celebrities opening up about the topic: Like me, Emma Watson conditions her hair down there, and Amber Rose recently revealed she rocks a bush that she grooms regularly with baby oil gel. There are also books like *Pussy: A Reclamation*, written by X-rated life coach Regena Thomashauer (aka Mama Gena), which quickly became a *New York Times* best seller late last year. But, really, we need to thank third-wave feminism for making the cleansing and grooming of our lady parts a personal and political platform.

Lauren "Lo" Bosworth, formerly the reality-show bestie of Lauren Conrad on *The Hills* and now founder of New York-based fem-care company Love Wellness, sums up this newfound verve for all things vaginal with a laugh: "It's funny when you leave Duane Reade and they still put your tampons in three plastic bags. I'm like, 'Um, thanks, but I'm not embarrassed to walk around with tampons.'"

Bosworth's Love Wellness is just one example of a spate of new companies selling feminine-care products that aim to empower the modern discerning woman. The Honey Pot Company makes refreshing wipes with probiotics that promote healthy bacterial balance, SweetSpot Labs has a gentle cleanser that won't irritate delicate tissue, and there's even a serum designed to smooth fine lines and brighten the skin below the belt from a Scandinavian company called The Perfect V. (Yes, antiaging your intimate parts is now a thing.)

Like many of the other women entrepreneurs entering the market, Bosworth launched her company for personal reasons. She suffered years of recurring vaginal infections that weren't resolved by over-the-counter remedies or prescription medicine. "My frustration led me to have conversations with my female friends, which revealed that so many of them had the same issues," she says. Honey Pot CEO Beatrice Fellu Espada shares that she developed her line after enduring a seven-month bout of bacterial vaginosis, a condition that afflicts nearly a third of all women at some point.

Experts point out that these products are nonessential to healthy feminine hygiene, but they understand that women might appreciate gentle cleansers and oils that ritualize their time with their intimate area. And *gentle* is the key word: Dr. Giovannina Anthony, a gynecologist in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, says she's seen vulvar contact dermatitis (which can cause a rash or itching) and burning caused by harsh cleansers or overzealous scrubbing. The fact is, most gynecologists would agree that less is more when it comes to vaginal care. "My favorite med school professor used to say, 'The vagina is a self-cleaning oven,'" states Dr. Rebecca Nelken, an ob-gyn in Beverly Hills and an assistant professor of clinical obstetrics and gynecology at the University of Southern California's Keck School of Medicine.

It's no surprise, then, that today's female-focused companies are making products without loads of chemicals and synthetic fragrances, and that are formulated to cleanse without killing good bacteria or drying skin. I've tried several of them and can see the allure. Honey Pot's wipes are the perfect refresher post-yoga, and they don't contain glycerin, an ingredient that breaks down to sugars and may contribute to yeast infections. And while I couldn't bring myself to use The Perfect V's VV Serum (which "smooths fine wrinkles with temporary firming action," according to the packaging), its VV Beauty Mist with bilberry fruit extract is as soothing as promised, especially post-shave.

Speaking of shaving, if fem care is having a moment, then haircare down there is stealing the show. While all the women I interviewed for this article insist that waxing, shaving, or going au naturel is a personal choice, a practically hairless vulva and bikini line feels like a patriarchal by-product of another time. Celebrities like Gwyneth Paltrow, Lena Dunham, and *Broad City's* Ilana Glazer, for example, have publicly stated their preference for full hair. And in a country with a president who objectifies women 24/7, a bush feels like the perfect protest—for me, anyway. Thankfully, the new products designed to groom my lady garden are as chic as the luxe moisturizers and mists on my vanity.

"Our packaging is inspired by fashion labels like Saint Laurent and Chanel," says Laura Schubert, the Columbia Business

School alum who founded pubic-hair-centric company Fur with a schoolmate and her artist sister. The line includes the strand-softening conditioning oil actress Watson uses, as well as a stubble cream to thwart ingrown hairs. "Pubes are funny, but we wanted to make sure this was a serious product," says Schubert.

Ashley Armitage, who artfully photographs young women at their most intimate moments and goes by @ladyist on Instagram, caused pubic-hair polemics in 2015 when she posted a picture of a friend in a blue bikini bottom sprouting a halo of dark fuzz. A chorus of positive comments followed, mostly from her female fans. But when sexist Internet trolls showed up, an ugly debate raged. "They said it was disgusting and unhygienic and that no man would want you if you didn't shave," says Armitage, who lives in Seattle and doesn't prune her bikini line regularly. "All of my friends and I believe it should just be a matter of choice."

According to a recent article published in *JAMA Dermatology*, 84 percent of women report that they engage in some form of pubic-hair grooming, and what's fascinating to me is that nearly 60 percent of those say they groom for hygienic purposes. But, according to Anthony, the gynecologist, it's completely unnecessary. "I have never seen a patient with a medical issue because of her pubic hair. If it were dangerous, we would have evolved into hairless creatures," she says.

As a feminist, I'm thrilled that a cadre of women has reclaimed this market of intimate products and made a once-taboo topic worth talking about. Plus, my lady parts and I have developed a nice bond during my experiments with all the new wipes, creams, and cleansers. Will I continue to use all of them when my current supply runs out? I don't know. But I will reorder the Fur oil, which I make a little ritual of applying before bed. It softens my trimmed-but-full triangle of hair—and leaves behind a sweet and vaguely exotic scent, like my vulva and I are vacationing in Marrakech. Don't we deserve it? **mc**

TREND WATCH

PRIVATE PRACTICE

A wave of feminine-grooming products has made the personal way more political. Monica Corcoran Harel reports on the movement

GET DOWN

The latest products to help you groom and freshen your lady parts



1. FUR Fur Oil, \$44. 2. THE PERFECT V Shades of V Very V Luminizer, \$43. 3. THE HONEY POT COMPANY Normal Femini Wipes, \$10. 4. SUMMERS EVE Simply Summer's Eve Gentle Foaming Wash in Coconut Water, \$6. 5. SWEETSPOT LABS Coconut Lime Gentle Wash, \$8. 6. LOVE WELLNESS Good Girl Probiotics, \$30. For information on where to buy, see Shopping Directory.