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GUIDE BOOK



DESIGNER STILL MAKING WAVES IN SWIMWEAR

By Nerissa Pacio Itchon

Dressed in head-to-toe black with her signature cropped blond 'do on a recent trip to the Bay Area, Malia Mills' edgy New York style belies the island upbringing that launched her enduring career in swimwear design. Born and raised in Honolulu,

FIVE QUESTIONS

lu, the 51-year-old pioneer revolutionized the industry by launching her eponymous line of "bra-sized" bikinis in mix-and-match separates — a breakthrough 25 years ago for women looking for a more precise fit than the typical S, M, L options.

Swimwear obsessed since childhood, Mills' idea for a lingerie-inspired collection using atypical fabrics dawned on her in the early 1990s, after graduating from Cornell University and moving to San Francisco to work as an assistant designer for Jessica McClintock. It was then that a former college roommate at Sports Illustrated asked if she would make pieces for the magazine's iconic swimsuit issue.

"I left work that day and went to all the stores in San Francisco



Courtesy Malia Mills

Malia Mills, above, celebrates 25 years in the swimwear business. Her current suits include, top from left: the Hailey maillot; Calendar Girl bralette top; Clamoring for Cleavage mini corset top and Honey Rider bottom in denim; Damita bronze lace top and beaded bronze lace Lynley bottom; Starlet suit in white; Varitease in Paint the Town Red.

that sold swimwear, and 7,000 light bulbs went on," recalled Mills, whose retro-inspired designs hark back to the low-legged silhouettes of the 1960s. "It made no sense to me that the same-size top was clipped to the same-size bottom in the same fabric, and I couldn't just buy the top or the bottom if I wanted to."

Still going strong, Mills has expanded into ready-to-wear,

accessories and a new lingerie capsule collection. Her products are sold on her ecommerce site; in specialty retailers and luxury department stores; and in nine Malia Mills boutiques across the country, including Marin Country Mart in Larkspur.

She has also invested in educating the next generation of creatives, using her stores to offer career workshops for girls

SKIN-CARE SECRET? IT STARTS WITH C

By Janna Mandell

Skin care can be daunting for consumers. It seems like every day, a new product line or ingredient is touted as the most effective. But one thing as certain as death and taxes in the world of skin care is that topically applied antioxidants like vitamin C help to protect skin from pollution, UV damage and other aggressors while helping to stimulate collagen production.

Though it seems like more products than ever are touting vitamin C, it's actually been available since 1997, when SkinCeuticals, the original topical vitamin C, hit the market. SkinCeuticals' founding scientist, Dr. Sheldon Pinnell, created the brand after he and his research team discovered some mechanisms by which sun exposure causes photoaging. He and his team also described the use of L-ascorbic acid and the combination of other antioxidants to help protect and repair skin from sun damage and oxidative stress.

When vitamin C products first became commercially available, there was a lot of skepticism, remembers San Francisco dermatologist Dr. William Kwan.

"We knew that antioxidants helped with sun damage, but we weren't sure to what extent," he said. "Then, scientific studies done by Allergan and SkinCeuticals became available, which



SkinCeuticals launched in 1997 with its first topical oil harnessing the antioxidant power of vitamin C for skin care.

SkinCeuticals

gave us a firm, science-based foundation regarding the potential benefits of topically applied vitamin C, also known as L-ascorbic acid. I now recommend a variety of antioxidants, including vitamin C, in a daily skin care routine."

L-ascorbic acid has its share of challenges. As an acid, it can be potentially irritating to sensitive skin, and it's extremely volatile. "It's a great challenge for formulators," said Berkeley formulator and brand founder Marie Veronique. "L-ascorbic acid oxidizes very quickly in liquid. It can become very acidic and irritating

to the skin. Basically, its efficacy goes down the longer it's in liquid."

Veronique tackles this issue by making her namesake C + E Ferulic Serum an oil-based formula. "By making an oil-based serum, I'm still able to use L-ascorbic acid directly in an anhydrous solution without lowering the PH or risking oxidation."

Emeryville brand Biossance also uses oil as a carrier for vitamin C with its squalane and vitamin C rose oil. Nancy Leung, head of new product development for Biossance, believes that oil-based serums work at a deeper level in terms of collagen synthesis. "Because it's more stable, it retains its effectiveness better," Leung explained. Biossance uses its signature squalane oil as a carrier for its vitamin C serum, which according to Leung provides the skin with protection and emollient properties.

Searches for "Vitamin C serum" rose an eye-popping 3379 percent from November 2016-November 2017, and continue to trend upward, according to visual discovery app Pinterest.

While cult favorite beauty serum Vintner's Daughter doesn't specifically have vitamin C in its formula, it contains 14 other potent antioxidants like alpha-turmerone and AR-turmerone (found in turmeric); beta-carotene, a form of vitamin A that helps fight signs of aging and environmental damage; and phenolic acid, a calming, anti-

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Malia Mills

and supporting her production director, Libby Mattern, to launch her nonprofit Course of Trade, a skills training program for sewers run out of the company's Brooklyn headquarters. Style caught up to Mills en route to Los Angeles to talk about her San Francisco beginnings, the company's female-fierce philosophy and tips for buying a new suit.

Q: Did your Hawaiian roots influence your path to designing swimwear?

A: Two thousand percent! When we were growing up in Honolulu, swimwear was such a rite of passage. There were specialty boutiques, and you're like, "Is your mom going to allow you to buy a Surflife bikini?" They were very trendy knit bikinis that were striped, dark blue and baby blue striped hand-knit. I was about 12 before we left Honolulu and I begged my mom please, please, please let me get one. She finally took me, but I was totally flat-chested, so nothing fit. I went home and I took the top, folded it and stitched it down so it would fit me.

Q: How formative was that first job designing dresses at Jessica McClintock?

A: I learned as much as I did because even though I loved Jessica McClintock as a teenager, I had grown beyond that. My style wasn't that style when I took the job. Because of that, I could — from the outside looking in — find out what it is that people

love about the product and why they were such loyal fans for so long. I think if I had worked at Ann Demeulemeester, because I love the brand, I may not have been as innately curious. So I always tell people, don't necessarily go after the jobs of the brands that you love. Go after the job where the opportunities are the greatest.

Q: What has been an unexpected source of inspiration for you?

A: Recently, we started to do swimwear that has clothing as inspiration. So how do you peel away coverage, but not pull it all away? Like our Piper top. It has a high neckline, a wide shoulder top, and we added bands and ties that you wrap around so it almost feels like ready-to-wear. It's very dancer inspired. Dancers have an incredible way of layering things. You have to move, so you need high arm holes and you need the movement of a certain type of leg line. You can't be flailing and coming out of it in the front or sideways. There's a sense of coverage that's really fascinating.

Q: What is the biggest mistake women make while shopping for a swimsuit?

A: No, I can't wear stripes; I can't wear colors; I can't wear retro; or I can't wear skimpy. You have to set yourself up for all the exploration of going out there and seeing all the options. Yes, you're going to try some stuff on and you're going to laugh. Yes, it's

ridiculous and you'll want to take it off — immediately. But don't be so hard on yourself. It's not you, it's the suit. Just keep trying!

Q: Considering that your 35-person company is nearly all female — with the exception of Frank, your cutter — has the #MeToo movement influenced the way you do business?

A: Totally. The #MeToo is part and parcel of the election. We were pretty transparent about who we wanted in the White House. ... While we were brave about posting things on our website — we made a bikini that said Nasty Woman on the back in crystals, we have our "Future Is Female" T-shirts that we sell a ton of — I don't think we ever really explicitly said in any of our messaging what we stand for. So I wrote an email to all of our customers. It was saying we're bummed, but we need to rally, it's going to be shoulder to shoulder, and we're going to take one step at a time to make these next years as best as possible. I also said to our team, we must look at everybody we do business with, and we must see if there's parity between men and women. We looked at our banks, our fabric suppliers, our lawyers. We dug deeper into all the people that we do business with to say: We need to hold you to a higher standard.

Nerissa Pacio Itchon is a Bay Area freelance writer. Email: style@sfgchronicle.com.

inflammatory antioxidant.

"Antioxidants are super powerful and multicorrectional," said Vintner's Daughter founder April Gargiulo of San Francisco. "We all deal with inflammation caused by free radicals, and antioxidants are the No. 1 tool to address it."

Since antioxidants like vitamin C oxidize rapidly in liquid, Mill Valley's True Botanicals offers two antioxidant boosters in powder form to ensure efficacy and potency. The brand's vitamin C booster is vitamin C and ferulic acid, and its newer antioxidant booster is made up of apple peel, quercetin and resveratrol. Hillary Peterson, founder and president of True Botanicals, explained why antioxidants derived from apple peel are so effective.

"Think about an apple hanging on its tree. It's hammered with sun throughout the day, is exposed to rain and wind, and still manages to protect its fruit from exposure. It has the same effects on our skin — it protects it from environmental damage and prevents oxidative stress." Peterson recommends those with sensitive skin opt for the line's gentler antioxidant booster.

Dermatologist Kwan emphasized that although antioxidants like vitamin C are incredibly effective, they should be approached cautiously.

"I always recommend that my patients moisturize 10 minutes after applying, and be careful not to use too many additional exfoliants, alcohol-based toners or retinol/retinoids when trying a new antioxidant," he said.

Janna Mandell is a freelance writer in Marin County. Email: style@sfgchronicle.com.

Take your vitamins

Skin experts agree that antioxidants like vitamin C are beneficial in protecting your skin from the sun and the environment as well as stimulating collagen production. Here are a few products to consider:

If you have sensitive, reactive skin, be cautious when using any sort of acids, including L-ascorbic acid (vitamin C). Get your daily antioxidant dose by incorporating **True Botanicals Antioxidant Booster** into your skin care regimen. \$90, <https://truebotanicals.com>.



True Botanicals

Dermatologist Dr. William Kwan recommends **SkinCeuticals Phloretin CF Gel** to his darker-complected clients who, he says, "tend to have oilier skin." \$165, <https://www.skinceuticals.com>.

For dry, dehydrated skin, try a gentle mega-moisturizing option like the **Biossance Squalane + Vitamin C Rose Oil**. \$72, <https://biossance.com>.

If your skin is having an identity crisis, giving you acne one day and dryness another, help your skin find its true self by balancing and nourishing it with **Vintner's Daughter Active Botanical Serum**. \$185, <https://vintnersdaughter.com>.

If you want all the antioxidant goodness from a potent vitamin C serum but without the solvents and fillers, try clean but uber-effective **Marie Veronique C + E+ Ferulic Serum**. \$90, www.marieveronique.com.



Marie Veronique

If fine lines and texture are your biggest skin concerns, **Kiehl's Powerful-Strength Line-Reducing Concentrate** boasts 12.5 percent vitamin C and hyaluronic acid, a hydrating powerhouse that holds up to 1,000 times its weight in water. From \$62, www.kiehls.com.



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