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SKIN DEEP

Aestheticians Who Get in Your Face

By BETH LANDMAN

WHEN Isabel Dassinger arrived at Townhouse Spa with its mother-of-pearl walls and roaring fireplace, she was anticipating an afternoon of coddling. But just as Ms. Dassinger, 50, had relaxed under a heated blanket, the rebuke of her facialist, Julie Lindh, put her on edge. “If you don’t stay out of the sun and use the products I suggest,” Ms. Lindh warned, “you will have saggy skin, jowls, and look like someone’s grandmother in a couple of years.”

Ms. Dassinger, who runs a healing center in Montclair, N.J., was aghast. “At first I thought she was kidding,” she said. “She wasn’t.”

Still, Ms. Dassinger returned for another appointment and now visits Ms. Lindh monthly because she relies on her high-tech solutions and tell-it-like-it-is diagnoses. “There is a nicer way she could deliver her comments, but you get used to it,” said Ms. Dassinger, who has her skin stimulated with an [ultrasound](#) machine. “Julie gets away with talking to people like that because she makes your skin look amazing.”

In the past, facialists basically cleaned pores, applied a mask and rubbed cream on your décolletage. The extent of their expertise was determining whether skin was oily, dry or sensitive.

Now that professional skincare is rife with options, and the goal is often to take years, not simply pollutants from a face, the aesthetician has become the decider. She makes it her business to berate clients who eat poorly, and decides whether to use light-emitting diodes, mild peels or blue, red and green light therapy.

That technological artillery is part of the reason that facialists, once considered subservient worker bees, have won the respect of clients.

“This is the time of the über-aesthetician,” said Anna L. Moine, a consultant to the spa industry. “She is becoming the arbiter of your life, a second mother who even tells you what to eat. Some of them are actually dictatorial. These people are being venerated because the new

technology has made them vehicles to maintaining the image of youth.”

That some aestheticians now work at “medi-spas,” where facials are performed under a doctor’s auspices, has also added to their credibility in the eyes of customers. The number of so-called medi-spas nationwide has more than tripled, to 976 in 2007, up from 310 in 2006, according to the International Spa Association.

“There has been a shift of power,” said Dr. Pamela Peeke, an assistant clinical professor of medicine at the [University of Maryland](#), and a former medical adviser to the International Spa Association. “A lot of these people also work in doctors’ offices; dermatologists and plastic surgeons actually refer patients to them.”

That wasn’t always the case. Customers “used to treat us like maids,” said Aida Bicaj, an aesthetician whose skincare salon is on the Upper East Side. “Now they are treating us like medical professionals.”

Aestheticians in most states, including New York and California, must complete 600 hours of classes at an aesthetics school to get a license. Last summer, Atelier Esthétique Institute of Esthetics in Manhattan offered an additional 350-hour course, approved by New York state, for facialists who wanted an advanced diploma.

No matter their training, facialists cannot match dermatologists’ years of medical school. But that doesn’t stop clients from listening to the edicts of their facialists.

Rebecca Johnson, now an owner of a spa in Colorado Springs, first visited Ms. Bicaj’s salon five years ago. She said that she didn’t want electrical stimulation or any acid-based products on her sensitive skin.

Ms. Bicaj overruled her. When asked for her reasoning by a reporter, Ms. Bicaj, who charges \$475 for a facial, explained: “Do you tell the doctor what you need?” A client cannot tell me what she needs.”

A dozen facials and microcurrent procedures later, Ms. Johnson, 57, is a convert. “With Aida, my skin is better than when I was 35,” she said.

To bolster their credibility, some aestheticians pepper their consultations with medical terminology. “We are competing with doctors,” said Sonya Dakar, who dishes out her biting assessments to [Gwyneth Paltrow](#) and the hoi polloi alike. “I take photos, give them a consultation, and use medical terms, like a doctor. If you have the answer for them, you are the pinnacle in the planet, but you can’t be a diva unless you really know what you are doing.”

Ms. Dakar, who did 600 hours of training in her native Israel, doesn’t candy-coat. “If you are spineless and vulnerable, you shouldn’t come to me,” she said. “I will tell them they have skin like a Shar-Pei, but in a more clinical way.”

These days, consumers not only want results, they also expect a facial to come with a heavy dose of advice. “An aesthetician may have been reluctant to offer criticism before,” said Mark Wuttke, a spa consultant,

“but now a consumer expects to have some knowledge imparted during an appointment. It’s considered added value.”

And once clients trust their facialists or get winsome results, they may be reluctant to skip appointments, even if they must tolerate tirades.

“Lucy is my life; sad, isn’t it?” said Michelle Sabari, a publicist in Manhattan, referring to Lucy Slivinsky, her facialist at Dr. Howard Sobel’s Skin and Spa Cosmetic Surgery Center in Manhattan. “She reprimands me if I do anything wrong, but I am booked with her through January ’08.”

Some facialists stoke their fearsome reputations to generate business. Browbeaten clients, of course, fear that if they don’t follow instructions to the letter their skin won’t look its best.

Scare tactics can backfire. Emily Feingold, 29, a vice president of corporate communications for the Weinstein Company, said she went to an aesthetician in Chelsea and was told that her eyes looked as if they belonged to a woman in her 40s. “I went to have fun, a relaxing spa day, but they emotionally demoralized me to keep me coming back,” said Ms. Feingold, who hasn’t been back since.

It can be difficult for customers to figure out which procedures or products they really need, and which ones the facialist recommends just to increase revenue. Acquiesce to one too many recommendations, and your facial could cost you far more than you thought. Ms. Dakar’s basic facial costs \$225, but that’s before extras like a \$1,000 vitamin-A pumpkin peel.

This new breed of aesthetician does not tolerate tardiness and if a booking is not canceled within 24 hours, the client will be charged. “It makes clients more responsible,” said Christine Chin, who dismissed Naomi Campbell as a client for perpetual lateness.

Ms. Chin was one of the first to institute such a rule, but now many spas like Susan Ciminelli Day Spa have followed suit. “Before, they could call and say ‘I have a cold, I have a poison,’” Ms. Chin said.

No more. Clients must show up on time, braced for a tongue-lashing. “If their complexion is not the right color, I tell them, ‘Your face doesn’t match your neck,’” Ms. Chin said. “Sometimes they start crying. But I have a love-hate relationship with my clients. If they listen to me, eventually they are happy.”

Ms. Chin’s attitude sums up the current climate. “I am very strict,” she said. “If you don’t like our rules, then we say, ‘Goodbye, you can go somewhere else and you can keep your [zits](#).’”

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