

**FIVE MINUTES
WITH MARY THÉ**

International Beauty Expert, President and Founder of Mary Thé Skin Care

Mary Thé talks about her unusual upbringing, her business and beauty philosophy, what's wrong with beauty trends today, and her own skin-care secrets.

Who is Mary Thé? For nearly three decades, I've been San Francisco's leading aesthetician and a respected international beauty expert. I'm the founder of Mary Thé Skin Care and since 1979 have had a thriving salon in the downtown Union Square area of the city.

We provide very personalized skin-care attention for both men and women, and have earned a reputation for offering cutting-edge products and treatments from around the globe based on my travels every year. Although we also offer waxing, eyebrow shaping, and eyelash tinting, we don't do hair or nails. As one long-time client recently remarked, "You don't go to Mary Thé's to be seen, it's the real thing!"

Throughout the years, the name of my business has changed. It started out as "About Face," then evolved to "Mary Oei," my married name at the time. For the last 14 years, I've operated under my maiden name and we've been located at 153 Maiden Lane, next to the Chanel boutique. For a time in the mid-80s, I also had a skin-care counter in my name at Macy's as a part of a beauty treatment center with Adrienne Arpel and Orlane.

Today I am happily 49, the proud mother of two children, Natalie and Brian, and am married to a wonderful man, Po Chi Wu, a venture capitalist. We live in the hills of Orinda outside of San Francisco.

Why the focus on skin care? It was a combination of my training and an opportunity I saw in the early 70s to better educate Americans about skin care.

My core beauty training was in Europe, the world's pioneering "capitol" in scientific skin care. Unlike other areas of the world, in Europe there are schools devoted exclusively to skin care. In 1971 I attended one in Amsterdam, and later received the Swiss CITEDSCO (Comite' International d'Esthétiques et de Cosmetologie) diploma. With a rigorous qualifying exam, it's internationally recognized as the highest professional degree in aesthetics. For comparison, in California anyone with a cosmetology license (what hairdressers must have) can provide skin care. It's similar in other parts of the country and the world, which is why European training has retained such a mark of distinction.

When I came to the U.S. in 1973, I was amazed to find how little Americans knew about skin care. Everything was makeup, makeup, and makeup! Most salons catered to this. I saw an opportunity to carve a niche by combining my European skin-care training

with my Asian-inspired beauty philosophy. With 79 million baby boomers (those born between 1946-1964) coming to grips with aging, my business has grown considerably over the years. Thanks in part to the media and the Internet, people are also beginning to realize that good skin care involves more than just jumping into the shower every morning.

What has given Mary Thé "staying power" all of these years? First, it has been our commitment to building long-term relationships. We treat generations of families: the grandmother, her daughter, and now the grandchildren—even the grandsons! Clients like the fact that we get to know and understand them as people. They never feel like we are pushing unnecessary products or treatments.

Also, I have always traveled extensively to search for the world's best products and treatments and regularly attend conferences on beauty, health, and nutrition. Often I meet in the research labs with the beauty innovators themselves, from the founders of Biologique Recherche in Paris to the La Prairie Clinic in Switzerland to Dr. Des Fernandez in Capetown, South Africa.

This has helped Mary Thé Skin Care stay ahead of the curve and give customers the straightforward answers and education they want and need. Just as computers have evolved, so have cold creams. But this explosion in more effective anti-aging products and treatments has overwhelmed and confused most people.

The products and treatments we offer are often the "first to market" in San Francisco and sometimes even the US. Our treatments include everything from microdermabrasion, a safe alternative to chemical peels, to vitamin A & C delivery using sound waves that fortify skin from environmental pollutants, ultraviolet rays, and the corrosive effects of free radicals.

The products we offer are quite extensive. They come from around the globe: France, Austria, England, Switzerland, Italy, Monaco, Germany, Australia, South Africa, Canada, and the US to name a few sources. We don't carry full lines, but rather individual products we've found to be safest and most effective in treating certain skin types and conditions.

What's your background? In a word: global. My life's journey has spanned three continents: Asia, Europe, and North America. In fact, my unusual accent is a blend of Indonesian, German, Dutch and American English. I was born in Indonesia on the island of Java. My father

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was a successful businessman, and we lived a privileged, comfortable life. While I'm of Chinese descent, no one in my family line has actually lived in China for some time. Neither of my parents speak Chinese.

After the government was overthrown in Indonesia, my family left the country in 1968 when I was 14. It was a time of civil unrest and there was a backlash against upper middle-class Chinese. They had to dig up something, so we were accused of being communists, which could not have been further from the truth. In fact, we were democratic Catholics!

Where did your family go? We moved to Europe. First, we went to Bremen in northern Germany where my father had business relationships. It was quite a shock for me going from a small, all-girl private school to a large public school, K through 12. Most people I met there couldn't point to Indonesia on a map, and I was the only Asian. Many thought I had come from sleeping on a straw mat in a bamboo hut.

After leaving Indonesia and moving to Germany, I truly felt the effects of being "an outsider." Those experiences taught me lessons in both privilege and humility, and how to stand up for myself. Instead of turning me inward, they made me ever more determined to reach out, which is probably one of the keys to my success today.

My family eventually relocated to Holland outside of Amsterdam. The Dutch occupied Indonesia for over 300 years, so there was always an exchange of people and ideas between the two countries. Before moving to Europe, my parents' "secret" language had been Dutch. So in Holland, we were able to immediately join a large Indonesian-Chinese community of professionals and their families. I finished my schooling, and then completed a two-year professional aesthetics program before moving to the US to marry my first, now former, husband.

What got you interested in beauty? Many people have asked, and my best answer is this: It's simply the way I am. While growing up, my mother was a powerful role model who was always interested in promoting beauty around us. In fact, one of my favorite pastimes was—and still is—flower arranging, a high art form in Asia. Looking back now, however, it's clear why God put me on this path. Beauty for me has become a bridge to informing and inspiring others.

How did you get your start in San Francisco? I interviewed initially with Elizabeth Arden, but my prospects were cut short because I was too short! At 5'2", I was an inch below the company's minimum height requirements. Because all their stools and beds were at a specific elevation, the company believed I wouldn't be able to properly reach and treat clients. Subsequently, I landed my first job at Mr. Lee's (owned by Lee Bledsoe), the most popular beauty salon in the city at that time and later with Georgina's where I worked for four years in skin care before setting off on my own in 1979.

How have your Asian roots influenced your philosophy towards beauty? Overall, Asian life is more spiritually oriented. The tradition that has influenced me most is a holistic approach to caring for ourselves. What we've known in Asia for thousands of years, and which is now being confirmed by Western science, is that mental states and physical well-being are intimately connected. Our external skin tissue is the physical reflection of everything that happens in our lives: the ways we live, eat, and breathe, as well as our thoughts, desires, and emotions.

After 30 years, have you discovered the secret to eternal beauty? For me, conveying a sense of overall well-being is the real secret to true beauty. In Indonesia, there is an ancient Javanese expression that, roughly translated, defines absolute beauty as "the balance between inner and outer beauty, between that which is visible and that which lies within." I call it beauty with integrity.

What is beauty with integrity? It's a balanced, holistic, and responsible approach to beauty that embraces both the inner and outer self. This might seem surprising coming from someone who has made a career in skin care, but I don't want people to become obsessed with their beauty! Beauty with integrity is projecting an overall sense of well-being—one that endears and endures. It links skin care to body, mind, and soul, and is based on the virtues of self-acceptance. When continually focused on outer beauty, one gets trapped in a vicious, unhealthy cycle of never being truly satisfied or fulfilled.

We are all going to get old, eventually, no matter what we do to our skin. So we must learn to embrace our many accomplishments and milestones, even though they might involve a few wrinkles. The problem,

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however, is that we are continually bombarded by the message that physical beauty is the express ticket to love and success. This has created a quick fix, shortsighted approach to beauty and skin care.

We think if we fix that blemish, get rid of those bags, get Botox injections, and undergo plastic surgery—then somehow we will gain acceptance. But what really endears us to others is our inner beauty, which is essential to projecting our outer beauty. Of course, people still need to address their skin problems and concerns, but everyone needs to keep a sense of balance in their approach. I see too many educated professionals who are completely obsessed with maintaining a youthful appearance.

Can you give some examples of women who have mastered beauty with integrity? Let me answer that by posing a question, “Who would you rather be for a lifetime: Marilyn Monroe or Oprah?” That question usually stumps women for a minute. Ultimately, while drawn to the physical beauty of Marilyn, most would rather be Oprah—even with her weight problems. Marilyn oozed outer beauty, but lacked an inner well-being, driven home by her tragic death. She’s a reminder that physical beauty isn’t everything. On the other hand, while Oprah is by no means your stereotypical beauty queen, her inner beauty—confidence, self-awareness, compassion for others, love of self and life—drives and enhances her outer beauty.

I always try to get my clients to see this “bigger picture,” to use beauty as a bridge to greater spirituality and well-being. Early in my career, I used to think a sign of success was when clients fell asleep during treatment. Now I practice the opposite. I tell them, “You can sleep at home, stay awake here and you will learn something.”

How did you get involved with novelist Danielle Steele and write two books? When I was pregnant with my first child, I took an exercise class with six other pregnant women, including Danielle, at her home. After the babies were born, Danielle had an idea for us to collectively share our experiences in a book. We ended up writing two books, *Having A Baby* and *After Having A Baby*, both published by Dell in the 80s. Along the way, we became known as “The Super Seven Who Gave Birth To The Sensational Seven.” We were featured in local and national magazines and newspapers and even appeared on Phil Donahue.

You’re turning 50 this year. What are some of your favorite anti-aging products and treatments? One of my favorite products is MC110. This literal “gem” works wonders on perking up facial skin. MC110 is a liquid containing minerals released from the crushed stones of the Dead Sea, a body of water that has the most concentrated and varied mineral deposits anywhere in the world. I use it every morning.

My favorite treatment is RST, Renaissance de Souplesse Treatment, from France. Ideal for older skin, this is a highly effective anti-aging treatment that will immediately alleviate “stress traffic jams” on your face, making the skin feel and look younger. It can be used as an alternative to plastic surgery or Botox or as complementary treatment to help preserve the results of those procedures. Supporting the skin with serums created with advanced biotechnology and using Micro-current, RST is excellent for dry and dehydrated skin, normalizing muscle tension, and improving general circulation. It’s also great for a quick brightening up of one’s appearance before a special event.

As science and technology offer us increasingly more effective ways to maintain a youthful appearance, it is essential that we also value the wisdom gained along our life’s journey and learn to accept and celebrate our laugh lines. It’s my mission to inspire men and women to stay aware of what is truly important in life as they pursue their desire for external beauty.

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