

Sheer

Wave goodbye to suffering for your looks. **Belinda Richardson** discovers that Marcia Kilgore, the phenomenon behind Bliss Spa, believes beauty should be all good clean fun
Photograph David Montgomery

MARCIA KILGORE IS CURLED up on the sofa eating a chocolate-chip cookie. 'Here, take them away from me,' she says. 'I've already had three this morning.' Not exactly what you'd expect from America's biggest beauty icon and the woman responsible for some of the most famous skin in the world. I bet Estée Lauder or Helena Rubinstein never snacked on cookies at ten in the morning – nor any of their clients.

But then Kilgore, founder of the Bliss Spa empire and a millionaire several times over, is not your average tycoon. For a start, she travels around New York on the subway. When she's in the office, she tends to answer her own telephone, and, if she's unhappy with the state of the bathrooms, she'll willingly clean them herself.

Kilgore takes 'no bullshit'. And that is very much the message she has tried to convey in her beauty spas (currently two in New York and one in London). She believes that a trip to Bliss should be about having fun and beauty being made accessible to the masses rather than to just, say, Uma or Cindy or Madonna (all clients). 'New Yorkers are very cynical,' she says. 'They like something to be natural, clean and, above all, not shoved down your throat. So, when I opened my first salon in SoHo, I tried to take this on board. I thought the straight-talking approach was the best way to survive in an overcrowded market. Touch wood, it seems to be working.'

bliss

The basic Bliss concept is all pleasure, no pain. The no-dairy, no-wheat school of beauty therapy is banned from all the spas. 'If people are smiling, they look good,' says Kilgore. 'The people who look bad are the neurotic ones.' At Bliss, pre-treatment sustenance consists of wine and cheese, chocolates and cookies (though purists can get raw carrots and a glass of hot water if they want), and while you're having your treatment you can watch *Sex and the City* on one of many flat-screen televisions or check your share prices. The names of her products and treatments are fun, irreverent and more down-to-earth than those of her rivals. Who wouldn't want to try the wholesome-sounding Carrot and Sesame Body Buff? Though you might not find it so easy to admit the need for a Rock the Bloat Massage or a tinted pout-plumping lip balm.

It is incredible to think that anyone has made her fortune out of such a seemingly wacky trade, but it is not so much what Kilgore does for a living that is interesting as the charismatic dynamo that this woman is. Her story is more a fairytale than a story of furious ambition – and it all began because she had spots as teenager.

'I remember going to have a facial and everybody kept coming over and telling me how awful my skin was. It was like being somewhere in Eastern Europe. I longed for a friendly face or somebody to turn my skin problem into a joke. I remember coming out in tears, thinking there had to be a better way to treat people than this.'

At that time, she was a student working night shifts as a personal trainer to finance herself. When the summer holidays came and half her rich New York clients had headed off to the Hamptons, she decided to try giving facials. She never looked back.

'Hey, I'm no slacker but I realised I wasn't learning much at college so I thought



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I'd invest the money I'd already earned – a handsome \$300,000 – and put it into my own business.' In 1991, she opened a single-room office in SoHo, where she performed everything from treatments to laundry drop-offs, and then, two years later, she opened a mini-spa, called Let's Face It, round the corner. It was here that her innovative treatments and products got her noticed.

'It was probably the most difficult time of my life. I had no furniture and I barely ate, but it was also the most fun. When you're painting the walls yourself and you can't even afford a Diet Coke let alone a trip to the movies, you go into survival mode, which is a hell of a lot more interesting than just coasting along in life,' she says.

Looking at her today, now 34, immaculately dressed head-to-toe in black, with her trademark red lipstick and a bleached blonde crop that makes her look more like a scarecrow than an international beauty mogul, I am happy to say she is pimple-free. Even better, she is also free of all the airs and graces that so often go with fame.

'Yes, people do recognise me when I walk down the street,' she admits (she has been a regular guest on the Oprah Winfrey and Good Morning America television shows), 'but I wouldn't say it bothers me one way or another.' However, she adds, 'I got a real shock the

other day when Thierry [her husband, who joined her to help her start up the Bliss mail-order catalogue in 1996] was flicking through some magazine and suddenly there was a huge picture of me, having a pedicure and playing around with a laptop.'

Kilgore is referring to an advertising campaign that IBM ran, in which it used five successful American entrepreneurs, including a nuclear physicist and an explorer, to promote its new Think Pad. 'We were each paid \$5,000 and we agreed to give the money to charity,' she explains. 'I chose Médecins sans Frontières.' It is noteworthy that IBM should have taken the gamble that enough people would have heard of Marcia Kilgore and Bliss, let alone understand the concept. While in the world of women's glossy magazines she is well known, she is a less obvious choice for the more macho world of international business machines.

Yet IBM is not the only international company to have put its faith in Kilgore. Between 1996 and 1999, she was approached by no fewer than 16 companies who were interested in Bliss. In 1999, she chose to go with luxury-goods giant LVMH, which acquired 70 per cent of the business, a deal that apparently left Kilgore with \$30 million, which was what gave her the muscle to make Bliss a household name. Though Bliss might have seemed an unlikely match for LVMH – linked with stable brands such as Givenchy, Christian Dior and Guerlain – its chiefs say they 'fell in love with Marcia and felt there was a lot more than meets the eye with Bliss'.

Recent figures certainly seem to indicate they made the right decision. The Blissworld website, which sells the spa products for use at home, is currently drawing 100,000 shoppers a day; the mail-order catalogue is going out to more than 8 million homes in America and the plan is that it will shortly be launched in the UK. Even Julia Roberts has to wait six months for a top-to-toe treatment in Manhattan now.

Doesn't all this leave Kilgore just a little wide-eyed? After all, this is the girl from the outback village of Outlook, near Calgary in Canada, where the main source of entertainment is to drive the car up and down Main Street on a Sunday afternoon. 'If I had time to think about it, yes, I guess it would,' she says. 'Oh, I wish you hadn't mentioned Outlook, you've got me all sad thinking about my grandma's home-made cookies. You'd better pass me another chocolate chip, please.' ■

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