

# BEAUTY



Clockwise from left: Newspaper clippings and audiotapes from the La Mer archive; the kelp fermentation process; a 1960s-era jar of Crème de la Mer

learned to dance from Martha Graham, and at one point had to choose between “an Italian attorney who looked just like Dean Martin, and Sinatra”...before dropping them both. She first sought out Huber in the 1980s after obtaining a sample of Crème de la Mer at Henri Bendel.

“I called the man and said, ‘It’s incredible! It’s changed the texture of my skin,’” she says. “So the next time he came to New York, we met for lunch. He was tall and had the skin of a 12-year-old. And he just fell in love with me.” From that point on, Huber sent von Doz an astonishing 200 jars of Crème de la Mer a month. “I asked, ‘What am I going to do with all this cream?’ And Max said, ‘Just smear it all over!’” She loosens the collar of her crisp white blouse to reveal her neck and chest, which are extraordinarily youthful and smooth. “I’m telling you, the stuff is amazing. It even firms the bust,” she says. “I have people stop me in the street all the time, wanting to know who my plastic surgeon is. I send them to the La Mer counter.”

Von Doz welcomed Huber to her country home in New Hope, Pennsylvania—she shows me photos of the scientist posing in a path bordered by flowers, lounging in the sun with a fluffy white dog—and introduced him to her cousin, Mary Ellen Hecht, MD, then a prominent orthopedic surgeon in Manhattan. “Knowing what it had done for Max’s burns, I started using the Crème on my post-op patients even one day after surgery, as long as the wound was closed,” Hecht says. “And it was amazing how much it softened and soothed the scars. Max, of course, was pleased as punch.”

Huber was by all accounts an eccentric, magnetic personality. For a start, Hecht says, “his eating habits were a little strange.” He would customarily consume Crème de la Mer straight out of the jar or dollop it onto his dinner. “Lucienne and I often dined with Max at Laurent, which was then one of the most elegant restaurants in New York, and I swear to God, he would take his cream, mix it with applesauce, and eat it. He didn’t blink an eye, and after a while you just got used to it.”

The designer Ralph Rucci, also a friend of Huber’s, recalls that when they first met, at an elite dinner party in the West Village circa 1988, “Max became hypnotic, telling his story. He had a small vial of Crème de la Mer at everyone’s place setting, and he told us all, ‘Put some in your mouth. Eat it. It’s great for your digestion.’ I had glasses on, and Max said to me, ‘Do you have problems seeing? Take a small bit of this, dab your finger in water, and put it in your eye.’ He went around the table performing these miraculous moments, and

## THE DREAM CREAM

Reddit conspiracy theorists believe Crème de la Mer creator Max Huber never existed. April Long discovers the inspiring story of a man whose life was mythic, but no myth

If there ever was a beauty product that could be considered truly legendary, it would be Crème de la Mer—not only for its cult cachet as one of the priciest, and most coveted, moisturizers in the world, but also because of its oft-related origin story: Max Huber, a German-born aerospace physicist, suffered severe burns in a lab explosion in the 1950s while working on a rocket stabilizer. He spent the next 12 years experimenting with *Macrocystis pyrifera*, a variety of kelp found in the ocean near his California home, until he finally created an elixir that healed his wounds and restored his skin to such lustrous health that all evidence of the accident was erased. Huber started selling his creation, christened Crème de la Mer (you know, Cream of the Sea), in 1965; after his death in 1991, Estée Lauder purchased the brand from Huber’s daughter and turned it into the blockbuster luxury skin-care company we know today.

Go a little deeper, though, and you’ll find what might be one of the weirdest tales in the history of cosmetics. One involving a complexion-transforming wonder cream that could be eaten with a spoon; a beauty executive who enlisted a medium to channel a dead scientist; a glamorous countess who

once dated Frank Sinatra; a secret formula guarded by a single family and decoded with the help of a coterie of wealthy devotees; and, more recently, an Internet-fueled conspiracy theory throwing Huber’s very existence into doubt, based on the fact that there are no records of his accident at NASA (which somewhere along the way became name-dropped as his employer; he actually worked for an aerospace company called Cal-Val Research and Development Corp.) nor any Google-able obituary. Rummage around in official California death records, however, and you’ll find him: Maximillian Albert Huber, born outside of the United States on January 13, 1925; died in Los Angeles on November 5, 1991.

“Max Huber not real?” Seventy-seven-year-old Countess Lucienne von Doz, perched on a Louis XIV-style sofa in her opulent all-beige living room, high in a luxury apartment building on Central Park West, throws back her head and laughs. “That’s—excuse me—bullshit.” Von Doz is a lively charmer with a TV-movie-worthy bio: She married an Austrian count at 20 and divorced him a few years later when she got “tired of being with bodyguards and being dressed by Chanel,” was chummy with Pavarotti,



## BEAUTY Obsession

a cult formed. He was a dazzling, brilliant man, with so much charisma—always the life of a party, the center of attention. Everyone thought that they had found the fountain of youth when they found Max.”

By the time of his sudden death at the age of 66—von Doz believes the cause was a post-dental-procedure heart infection—Huber had established Crème de la Mer as a word-of-mouth sensation, sold in department stores such as the now-defunct I. Magnin as well as by mail order (a 1991 ad, proclaiming “Your skin will feel *alive*,” lists it at \$85 an ounce). “It was a buzz cream,” says Andrew Bevacqua, senior vice president of research and development at the Max Huber Research Labs, who started working at Lauder in 1986. “The Lauders always wanted to buy it, but Max wouldn’t sell.”

When Huber’s daughter, Marley, who’d been taught the zealously guarded recipe by her father, sold the brand in 1995, Bevacqua traveled to the Crème’s birthplace near Canoga Park, California. Walking through the doors of Huber’s lab—the skin-care equivalent of the opening of Tut’s tomb—Bevacqua says, “I saw all of these small pots, with copper plates in them and wires coming out of them going into an amplifier. And you had this strange noise—bubbling and gurgling—and there were all these flashing lights. It was like the Twilight Zone.” To create what he called the “miracle broth” at the heart of the Crème, Huber fermented each batch of kelp in a fish tank for three months while continuously playing a soundtrack of sorts—the noise, recorded on a reel-to-reel, of the previous fermentation—and exposing it to pulsed light. “It was a process,” Bevacqua says, “that I never could have imagined.”

When Bevacqua returned to the Lauder labs, he re-created the miracle broth as taught—but when the results were tested, both in vitro and on human skin, they didn’t rival the antioxidant and anti-inflammatory potency of the

original. Huber’s closest friends and VIP clients—including von Doz—were called in to evaluate each batch; trial after trial was rejected—the formula simply didn’t live up to the cream they’d been using for decades. With only a year before the Crème’s scheduled relaunch, the stakes were high: Lauder’s head of R & D, Joseph Gubernick, even called upon a psychic to conjure up Huber from beyond.

Gubernick “came to me with notes,” Bevacqua remembers. “‘Max says you didn’t do this and this.’ And I was like, ‘How did you talk to Max?’ He told me that a medium had channeled him. We went point by point through everything Max did, and Joe was like, ‘You didn’t mention light and sound energy. You need to go back and try it.’” It was only once Bevacqua added those elements—which he had initially skipped because, well, “they sounded crazy” (published studies have since shown that sound waves can act as catalysts to speed up the chemical reactions that occur during fermentation)—that the Lauder-brewed miracle broth finally matched the potency of Huber’s original in clinical evaluations.

Ever since Bevacqua’s breakthrough, the scientists at La Mer have followed Huber’s process to a T, playing his original sound waves during every fermentation and seeding every batch with a culture of the previous batch, like a yogurt, so that a continuous strain runs through every La Mer product. The recently refurbished Max Huber Research Labs in New Jersey showcases newly unearthed items from the brand’s archives, including equipment from Huber’s California HQ: antique audiotapes of various fermentations,

their sleeves marked with the physicist’s notes chronicling astronomical alignments; his fish tank; and vials, now extremely murky, of 50-year-old kelp. “I still think that Max is,” says Loretta Miraglia, senior vice president of global brand product development and innovation at La Mer. “I never met him, and yet he’s very present. There are very few people who have that impact.”

As the brand has expanded, Miraglia and Bevacqua have continued to be inspired not only by Huber’s visionary work but also by the kinds of things that he, as a physicist, would have been inspired by himself. Ideas for new products have been galvanized by everything from Buckminster Fuller’s geodesic domes to flexible glass, and they contain ingredients ranging from positively and negatively charged water to magnetized hematite.

“We’re constantly learning new things, even about the miracle broth,” Bevacqua says. “In addition to having incredible anti-irritant properties, it also stimulates electricity in the skin cells that produces proteins like collagen and elastin.”

Washington, DC, dermatologist Noëlle Sherber, MD, whose mother “lined up in the street” to buy Crème de la Mer from Huber himself 50 years ago, says that the core benefit of La Mer products may be their ability to keep the skin’s barrier robust. “Complexions become less reactive—and lose less water—when the barrier is functioning well,” she says. “Skin is smoother, plumper, and more even.”

When Huber concocted his potion, he likely had no idea that it could reach so far and have so many iterations. “People forget about Max,” says von Doz, who traveled the world for a time in the late ’90s as a La Mer ambassador, showing off her flawless skin. “Yes, this stuff comes from a lab—but there was a man behind it, a soul behind it. He wasn’t interested in the money. He just believed in the miracle, and that was enough for him.” ■



Clockwise: Huber and von Doz circa 1988; Huber's original fermentation tapes; a 1961 magazine featuring Huber's concept for a rocket launcher



## SPACE AGE NEWS

CHRONICLE OF AEROSPACE PROGRESS IN THE WEST

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32 Million lb. 'Telescoping' Liquid Booster Designed by Western Firm

Combustion Chambers Utilize New Technique

Development of a 32-million-pound "telescoping" liquid booster designed by the Western firm, which has been ordered by the U.S. Air Force, is being completed by the firm's engineers.

The booster is being developed for the Saturn C-4 rocket, which will be used to launch the Apollo moon landings.

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### SOFT FOCUS:

The newest addition to the La Mer range, the Moisturizing Soft Lotion, was inspired by Miraglia's interest in so-called superfluids, including futuristic liquid microchips currently being developed in Silicon Valley. The superlight, silky lotion features tiny gel-encapsulated moisture spheres; upon application, the gel dissolves, transporting the vital ingredients deep within the skin, where they deliver plumping, smoothing, and hydrating benefits.