

# IT'S NOT EASY BEING GREEN

As consumers become more health and eco-conscious there is an equal amount of pressure to make sure organic lives up to its name.

**EVERY TIME I** walk into a new hotel I can smell plants. This is not because greenhouse chic is the new style for hotel lobbies but because the hotel almost always has a recently opened spa and its treatments are all organic - hence the odour of fragrant decomposition.

Back in the day most hotel lobbies carried the whiff of alcohol and cigarette smoke, the bar situated close to the check-in. And the bar was often the engine of growth for the hotel's bottom line. Now that we live in a healthier age the hotel spa has become a source of revenue increases. That seems like an improvement but how can clients judge if an organic spa is truly healthy? And how do they know if its products are really natural?

The personal skincare market has annual revenues of about US\$500 billion annually but of that only about US\$10 billion is labelled as natural or organic. As environmental and health concerns mount, there is clearly room for rapid growth in organics, and that raises concerns about labelling and contents.

"It's a big industry when you consider the lack of regulation," says Mark Wuttke, head of the Atlanta-based Wuttke Group, which advises luxury hotels, spas and boutiques on the design and use of organic products. "We need authenticity, transparency and traceability. That will help consumers see the difference between people who came into this market because they saw there was money to be made, and those who are committed to organics as a way of life."

In the US several skin care companies are now being sued, not because their products were bad but because they led the consumer to believe they were organic when they were not. This had led to an industry-wide demand for greater and clearer certification.

Brenda Lee is one of the leading practitioners of organic spa treatments in Asia. In Hong Kong she treats clients at Farm, the Organic Spa ([www.farmtheorganicspa.com](http://www.farmtheorganicspa.com)) on Duddell St. Her products are available at beyond organic in the IFC and Harbour City malls. "We need to educate people about what goes into an organic product and makes it authentic," says Lee, who sells amala and Primavera products. "For some of our clients who are no longer teenagers they are conscious of ageing and the need to avoid illness. For them organic, healthy products are key but they want to be sure those products are what they claim to be."

Wuttke advises clients that they should find out as much as possible about the production process used to create an organic product. "The product must use seed extracts obtained with the latest technologies," he says. "Seeds are like the placenta in a pregnant woman's womb. They are the source of life. And it's important that the product uses the whole plant, not just fractions like the leaves, flowers or roots."

Wuttke also advises fans of organic to check the way a product has been distilled. As with wine, organics do not suit a "one size fits



Organic matters: all things green at Farm, the Organic Spa

all" mentality and each product requires custom distillation to bring out its most potent properties.

Unfortunately the industry has yet to adopt a global standard for quality. And even when standards exist they can be confusing. A brand that buys plants from organic consumer associations and makes them into a skincare product cannot claim the item is organic if between harvest and point of sale they use all sorts of nasty additives. Some of the most renowned natural product companies in the world have done just that and they are now being sued by the 800,000-strong California Organic Consumer Association.

"Education is key," says Wuttke. "I could walk into a couple of natural skincare products stores in Hong Kong right now that claim to be organic but only seven or eight of their products, out of 100 or 150, actually fulfil the criteria I would use. Yet the public perceives them as organic. The public needs to be more demanding about what they will accept and force the manufacturers to be more transparent about what they do."

In other words, buyer beware. And for those interested in knowing more, next month Hong Kong will play host to the Natural Products Expo Asia 2009 ([www.naturalproductsasia.com](http://www.naturalproductsasia.com)) where the focus will be the natural and organics products market in China. Given recent scares about milk additives on the mainland this expo might be a good place to start discovering and setting exacting standards for the organics industry. ■