

Taking business IN HAND

An Auckland beauty company has created a product which is truly a family affair

WHEN two resourceful Auckland women decided the expensive handcreams they'd been using were somewhat lacklustre, they set out to create a better one. So business partners Annie Porter and Sara Sadd, then the owners of Masterworks gallery, spent many months researching traditional production methods and natural ingredients.

Porter wanted a handcream that "emulsified, smelled good, was non-greasy and easily absorbed — and last, but not least, I could put it on my hands as I was walking out of the bedroom and still turn the front door knob without slipping and sliding around".

With such a lot of boxes to tick, it's not surprising it took two years to arrive at just the right formulation. Although Porter and Sadd were unaware of it at the time, the birth of the green tea and geranium handcream in 2004 — created simply to fulfil a personal need — would form the basis of a boutique bath, beauty and skincare range that today offers 19 products and has more than 40 stockists throughout New Zealand.

And that very first handcream in green tea and geranium, the brand's signature scent, is still Nellie Tier's top-selling item.

Nellie Tier, after whom the range is named, was Annie's maternal grandmother who arrived in New Zealand from Australia in about 1905. By all accounts a staunch and no-nonsense pioneering woman, she raised nine children and was well known for concocting herbal remedies.

The familial connection runs deep in the Nellie Tier story. Victoria Porter,

Porter's 39-year-old daughter, handles the marketing for the brand. She explains that every female descendant of Nellie (and of Sadd's grandmother Maud) has her name included on the range's labels. "We made it an absolute pact that whenever a new female member was born in the family, at great expense we would get the labels reprinted and her name would be put on it," says Victoria. "It's a tribute to Nellie in that she was a good, hardworking woman and that's how we see ourselves; all of us women here working and making something we love."

Recent lobbying, however, from the men in the family has resulted in a concession being made. The labels on the more unisex products, such as liquid soaps and body washes, now have the male descendants' names included too. So names such as Darcy, Finn, Liam and Max are now interspersed with the likes of Charlotte, Clover, Elizabeth and Kushla.

Fragrances, with names as evocative as May Chang and Mandarin, Sweet Basil and Lime, are an intrinsic part of the offering. Porter, 63, is the brains — or should that be the nose? — behind the distinctive and unique scents.

"I'm forever playing around with my lotions and potions," she says. "They're made from pure essential oils, chosen initially for their aroma-therapeutic properties, that have been used in beauty products for centuries."

Some of the brand's fragrances are simple, others, more complex, are a combination of 12 or more essential oils. So what makes a classic Nellie Tier scent? "To me they all smell fresh. I can smell the individual flowers or herbs and, best of all, they have no chemical undertones," says Porter.

In addition to the fragrances, a luxurious tactility distinguishes this label — which attracts more than its fair share of followers. In 2007 one American visitor to New Zealand discovered the range and promptly ordered it for her influential Washington DC giftware store, Proper Topper.

"It's a tribute to Nellie in the sense that she was a good, salt-of-the-earth, hardworking woman and that's how we see ourselves; all of us women here working and making something that we love."

Victoria Porter

This led to editorial coverage in the prestigious *Washington Post* newspaper — and then to a jaw-dropping invitation to include their handcreams in the goody bags for the celebrities at last year's MTV awards. "Once the excitement of what they were asking us to do died down, we took a couple of breaths and spoke to friends in the PR industry," says Victoria. Because their products are handmade to order in small batches, such exposure could have ignited



The mother and daughter team at Nellie Tier natural skincare: Annie and Victoria Porter.

PICTURES / RABICHE MARTENS

demand they were unable to fulfil, so they reluctantly declined.

However, it seems the range was always destined for big things. Karen Walker took 400 Nellie Tier handcreams to New York Fashion Week in February this year for her VIP goody bags. As a result Victoria has fielded calls from store buyers all over the US as well as a *Harper's Bazaar* reporter.

Where to next for the Nellie Tier brand? Having launched an expanded offering which includes lip balm, eye gel, scented candles and a travel set, they've shifted to larger premises to increase production and are in the process of appointing a US distributor and making inroads into Europe.

And Porter, of course, is perpetually sniffing out potential new fragrances. On a recent visit to the spice markets in Kashgar, China, she noted a heady blend of pepper, anise, black cardamom and rose. "I'm thinking of a range that would come out in about two years' time and I'm thinking really spicy and rosy things," says Porter.

And, as for their thwarted debut at the MTV awards? "Fingers crossed they'll ask us again," says Victoria.

