

Skin Deep

Behind a Mysterious Balm, a Self-Made Pharaoh

By ANNA JANE GROSSMAN

WHO is LordPharaoh ImHotepAmonRa?

It is a question that has likely occurred to anyone who has used the sweet-smelling balm Egyptian Magic to soothe everything from minor burns to itchy scalp.

The mouthful of a name, which is written on jars of this pale-yellow unguent, refers to its maker, a debonair 62-year-old man who changed his name to make it sound, well, Egyptian.

Mr. ImHotepAmonRa, who oversees the production of 20,000 jars annually in

A product sold mainly by word of mouth attracts celebrities.

a factory in Washington, swears he does not advertise Egyptian Magic or court publicity. He also says he doesn't pretend to understand how the balm works — miraculously, the label promises. Yet Egyptian Magic has become a glossy magazine darling, combining a rare mix of dark-horse cool and celebrity cache — Juliette Lewis and Virginia Madsen are fans, as is, reportedly, Madonna.

"People want something that the celebrities use," said Virginia Lee, a senior research analyst at Euromonitor International, a market research firm. "But they also want something that feels unique, something that has a story behind it."

Egyptian Magic is outselling other personal care products at Whole Foods by more than 10 percent, said Jeremiah McElwee, a national coordinator at the company. If this salve has traction, it is in part because of the shifting marketplace.

In recent years, the natural product market has been growing roughly five times faster than the rest of the personal care industry, said Darrin Duber-Smith, the president of Green Marketing, a strategy company. One result is that many former mom-and-pop brands have become household names. Think Kiehl's or Jason Natural products.

Another result? Many businesses are no longer run by mom and pop. A pri-



PHOTOGRAPHS BY SUSANA RAAB FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES, ABOVE; AND TONY CENICOLA/THE NEW YORK TIMES

ANCIENT SECRET LordPharaoh ImHotepAmonRa says the formula for Egyptian Magic, which can be used on rashes, sunburns and scars, was first revealed to him by a stranger.

vate equity firm owns the majority stake of Burt's Bees. And Tom's of Maine? More like Tom's of Colgate-Palmolive.

But Egyptian Magic, which comes in nondescript plastic tubs, remains a decidedly low-key production, and it still has a pop at the helm. (A 4-ounce jar sells for \$32 on Egyptianmagic.com.)

The story of Egyptian Magic begins in 1986 at a Chicago diner when an elderly man approaches Westley Howard, a water filter salesman who is passing through. "He said, 'Brother, the spirit has moved me to reveal something to you,'" said Mr. Howard, as Mr. ImHotepAmonRa was then known. "It didn't seem too weird to me. I'm a spiritual person, so these things happen to me all the time."

The stranger's name was Dr. Imas.

He never revealed his first name or made it clear what kind of doctor he was. Over the next two years, Dr. Imas periodically visited Mr. Howard in Washington and showed him how to make a skin cream from olive oil, beeswax, bee pollen, royal jelly and bee propolis (a substance that seals hives).

Dr. Imas claimed it was the exact same formula for a cream found in ancient Egyptian tombs.

There is some basis to the mixture's pharaonic claim. Beeswax was a popular ingredient in ancient Egyptian cosmetics, as was olive oil, which has been used as a cleanser, moisturizer and antibacterial agent for centuries, said Bernie Hephrun, a researcher of Egyptian cosmetics in Reading, England.

Mr. Hephrun, who has worked to recreate unguents found in ancient

tombs for several European universities, is impressed with Egyptian Magic. But he did voice one qualm: "Ancient Egyptians didn't have

the ability to separate out pollen, jelly and propolis." Still, he said, "It has long been believed that Alexander the Great was preserved in honey when he died."

This is not a recommended use for Egyptian Magic.

Where did Dr. Imas come upon this formula? "He said it was revealed to him the way he was revealing it to me," Mr. ImHotepAmonRa said.

Stuart Henigson, a spokesman for Egyptian Magic, added that Dr. Imas

"was looking for someone who could take it to a larger audience." He was adamant that Egyptian Magic be rolled out in a particular way. "Word of mouth only, no paid advertising or endorsements," Mr. Henigson said.

Soon after Dr. Imas's death in 1991, his protégé, broke and sleeping in his office, began trading the cream for food at Yes! Organic Market on Connecticut Avenue in Washington.

Gary Cha, the owner of Yes!, described Mr. ImHotepAmonRa as "very stylish." "He was confident people would love his product," he said.

A clerk at Yes! suggested to Mr. ImHotepAmonRa that he send a sample to a friend of hers who worked for Wild Oats stores in New Mexico. The next year, a screenwriter mentioned it to a few alternative drug stores in Los Angeles, after discovering it in Santa Fe.

"I probably tell people about it at least once a day," said Bob Litvak, an owner of Santa Monica Homeopathic Pharmacy, a longtime supplier. He said the product's devotees tell him that Egyptian Magic "prevents diaper rash, it's good for sunburns, chemical burns, and oven burns, and"

Mr. Litvak paused as someone in the store reminded him of another use — "Oh, it's a good feminine lubricant."

It is not entirely true that Mr. ImHotepAmonRa has never sought publicity. Upon request, he has donated jars of Egyptian Magic to celebrity-packed charity events. And he regularly leaves containers of it at the reception desk of his homeopathic dentist.

Mr. ImHotepAmonRa's rapport with reporters and publicists walks a fine line between refreshing and bizarre. In e-mail messages he often attaches pictures of himself sporting headphones and dark nail polish. Sometimes he includes photos of his daughters and his "wife Vanessa." He also has forwarded photos of a stiletto-wearing woman he identified as his "girlfriend Erika."

When asked about his desire to share these personal details, he said, in an e-mail message, "I walk the talk. But I am a very private person. Enough of these childish questions."

The product got a boost in 2003 after a writer for Daily Candy in Los Angeles heard about Egyptian Magic from a friend of a friend whose doctor recommended it for surgical scars. Soon after the article ran, publicists in Los Angeles began requesting jars by the dozen.

"Here's this one little product that everyone wants and it's totally being carried by word of mouth," said Linda Arroz, a stylist and publicist in Hollywood. "I'll be on a set somewhere and I'll spot the jar and suddenly there will be six people gathering around going 'Oh, my God, isn't this the most amazing stuff?'"

Whether Egyptian Magic can relieve dandruff, athlete's foot and so forth has yet to be scientifically proven. This much is clear: Fans say it can be used in so many ways it makes duct tape look lazy.

On her shopping blog, TheFerretOnline.com, Ilene Rosh wrote about how the multipurpose balm reminded her of a "Saturday Night Live" sketch in which Chevy Chase assuages his family's wounds and zany problems with butter. Ms. Rosh is now hunting for the next unlikely hit. "I just heard about this new lip balm," she said. "It's called Chicken Poop."



EYE OF NEWT? NOT QUITE (THINK COW BARN AND CHICKEN COOP)

**MOTHER'S SPECIAL BLEND**

When Karen Benjamin of Boulder, Colo. was pregnant in 1971, she applied this homemade blend of oils to her belly to prevent stretch marks. Soon after, she and her husband, Tom, started selling it by mail order. (\$14.99 at Whole Foods, 212-673-5388)



BAG BALM This moisturizer, which is advertised as a cow udder emollient, has nonetheless found a human following. It is still made by a six-person company overseen by the granddaughter of the original owner. (\$7.99 at CVS.com)



CHICKEN POOP Concocted in the kitchen of Jamie Tabor, a Pilates instructor from Wichita, Kan., this nourishing lip balm is a top seller at Drugstore.com. (\$4 at ilovechickenpoop.com)



MORGAN'S POMADE Created by Robert Martin in 1873, this hair treatment is made by his descendants in Kent, England. Men use it to style and darken gray hair. (\$8.29 at New London Pharmacy, 212-243-4987) ANNA JANE GROSSMAN