



# The Unmistakable Michelle Harper

Words LIBBY PETERSON

Michelle Harper's alarm goes off in the early hours. She gets out of bed. She meditates. She pours herself a big cup of Colombian coffee. And then it begins: her 12-step beauty routine. First, the two-part hair wash, the conditioner, gloss and leave-in conditioner. Out of the shower, a three-part face-washing regimen, a mask and Tata Harper's new Brightening Essence. Then it's time for her prescription cream, facial serums, lotion, and a lotion-oil mixture she concocts herself. She tops it off with her heavy-duty mineral-based SPF 50 sunscreen. Jumping into phase two, she whips together her outfit for the day, always exquisitely styled. Her impeccable taste in couture, frequent front-row presence at Fashion Week and trusted aesthetic advisory with various designers have made her a style icon. You will never find her in sweatpants, heaven forbid in the K word (khakis). And for that matter, she almost never leaves without coating her lips in her signature red. All said and done, she's out the door in 30 minutes or less.

It goes without saying that Harper doesn't mess around—not with time, skincare, style, nor her enduring work as a beauty consultant. She's a scrupulous researcher, a spirited thinker, a witty wisecracker and an exceptionally daring dresser. A trendsetter? Probably, but Harper would shake her head. "Trends are garnish, not the main course," she says.

Claiming Harper has one finger on the pulse of the beauty industry is counting nine too few; she knows exactly where it stands, where it should be heading, and where it hasn't even realized it can go. She'll tell you the beauty world is as multifaceted and diverse as it's ever been—the profusion of methods, hues and textures out there let consumers define and refine their individuality like never before—but still, Harper knows there is vast, barren room for improvement and forsaken holes that have yet to be sealed.

On top of the constant deluge of consulting ventures, like a new lifestyle cosmetics-based line that she's helping launch this year, Harper is targeting some of those gaps. Her goal for 2016 is to develop a signature line of lifestyle cosmetics products with business partner David Foote, who developed one of her favorite brands, Jaboneria Marianella, that they're also working on together. This next one would consist of an innovative collection of hero products (and very limited SKUs) targeted for both men and women whose needs have not yet been met.

She's outspoken about one particularly glaring gap in beauty, and that's the lack of acne solutions that are healthy, gentle and truly effective. "It's so devastating emotionally for those who suffer from it, and it's still such a struggle for people who try everything, even putting their health at risk with products like Accutane, for women who get yeast infections from the antibiotics—and yes, I'm going there," she exclaims, "we have to remove the taboo, and we have to come up with better solutions!"

She does see more promising areas of evolution, including a greater emphasis toward unisex cosmetics and within that, a burgeoning acceptance of color for men. "I see beauty campaigns with men in makeup, and I'm not talking a light lip gloss, I'm talking full makeup, full hair," Harper says. "To me it signals gender freedom and an increasing acceptance of a reality that is happening culturally anyway."

Take, for instance, Troi Ollivierre's line of lipsticks for men, each shade named after a boy, which was later similarly released by Tom Ford in his "Lips & Boys" collection. Or MAC's commercial of a young man having a dream about getting a makeover, and then the cosmetic company swooping in and making it come true in full color makeup.

The trend started years ago with Jean-Paul Gaultier's collection of makeup for men that highlighted their features. "Sadly, as usual, the genius of Jean-Paul Gaultier is always ahead of his time," she says. "It's one of my favorite lines, and for me it made sense, but clearly the market wasn't there yet. Right now, with marriage equality and everything that's happening, I see the market going there."

It's hard to believe that Harper, so in step with the industry, worked anywhere else. She kick-started and continues working with her sister-in-law Tata Harper's acclaimed line of organic, nontoxic skincare, and she's been steadily guiding creative brands and people like makeup artist Pati Dubroff through the baffling industry obstacles under her consulting company, Michelle Violy Harper. Be that as it may, she got her start in investment banking.

Back then, she was assigned to write a business plan for Darac Beauty, which would eventually launch her into a position as co-founder of the company. In the end Darac Beauty closed, but for Harper it wasn't a loss; she generated almost \$10 million for a startup in two years with only five products. And assuredly, she got a chance to do most everything else—packing boxes, holding board meetings with senior execs, reading through binders of operating agreements, working A-to-Z hands-on with labs and warehouses. "My god, I learned something every single day," she says, "so who cares about working seven days a week when you're doing what you love? You don't have time to sit down and get bored."

With her own business, started in 2010, it's been a progression fusing together what can be polar opposites, she says. "It's hard, finding someone who has a real business brain and a really creative brain, someone who can sort of dance at both weddings, and bring the weddings together and everyone gets married happily ever after. That's what I've been refining my business into, and myself."

Harper comes from a fiercely matriarchal Colombian-Scottish family. Years ago back in Barranquilla, Colombia (where Harper spent part of her upbringing, as well as in Manhattan, Switzerland, France and Spain), her grandmother was the first to pique her interest in beauty.

Harper considers her the "epitome of glamour." As a young child she admired her pale skin and coiffed black hair (when she wasn't wearing one of her wigs from Paris, neatly packed in beautiful hat boxes from Balenciaga). She'd paint her lips with her grandmother's Paloma Picasso red lipstick, douse herself with the crystal flacon of Guerlain perfume, slip on her gloves, her couture clothing, her heels—under her grandmother's tutelage, Harper learned to walk up and down a staircase in them unflinchingly, a book balanced on her head.

"Now I have wigs that are made for me," she says, by the hairdresser Danilo, "and the fact that I have the pale skin, the dark hair, the red lips, I can see the influence so clearly even though it's not identical." Instead of Paloma Picasso, Harper mixes in a little red that she picked up on a trip to Japan, traditionally used by geisha for centuries. Her grandmother maintained a strict skincare routine, too, and if her goal was to look 30 years younger at nearly 90 years old today, Harper says, it's working. Though if you ask her if their regimens are similar: "No," Harper teases, "nobody follows my psychotic (but effective) routine."

Harper's cunning sense of business (one of her favorite expressions is "don't be afraid to give up the good to go for the great") stemmed from her mother, a "titan of Wall Street." Harper calls her, who was one of the highest paid individuals at the then-dominant J.P. Morgan. "As a woman, as a mom from Colombia who started from the bottom, it was unheard of."

One day her mother's boss pulled her aside, asked her sarcastically if she knew she was a woman, and told her to start wearing skirts instead of pants, like a woman should. Her mother shot back, "If you want me to continue making you all the money I'm making you, I'll be doing it in pants." As it were, Harper's mother left Wall Street to start her own company, too. In her new office, she pinned up a quote that's been passed down through generations in her family: "There are no impossible things, only incapable people."

Harper may have inherited her grandmother's penchant for panache and her mother's courageous business acumen, but melding the two successfully and seamlessly is a wonder unto its own. It's her mark on the industry that she's constantly instilling in her work today: synthesizing, reinventing, treating business—and beauty—as an art form.