Alumni

Glow Recipe and the Joys of Korean Skin Care

Christine Chang ’10GSAS is on a mission to make K-beauty rituals easy and fun.

By
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Christine Chang. (Courtesy of Glow Recipe)

Christine Chang ’10GSAS remembers how, when she was growing up, her Korean grandmother used to rub chilled watermelon rinds on her skin to heal rashes and other irritations. “It was a DIY anti-inflammatory treatment, rich with antioxidants

and amino acids," says Chang, who explains that Koreans have a long tradition of using natural, everyday ingredients — from rice water to green tea to snail slime — to soothe and hydrate their skin.

Today, Chang is the cofounder and co-CEO of Glow Recipe, a cosmetics brand that is harnessing the power of fruit (not snails) and bringing Korean beauty rituals to a global audience. Since launching in 2014, the New York–based startup has earned the attention of skin-care enthusiasts and influencers for its face masks, moisturizers, serums, cleansers, toners, and lip balms. Designed to achieve a youthful, dewy "glow," each product is concocted from a fruit extract like watermelon, plum, or avocado and infused with ingredients such as retinol, hyaluronic acid, and gentle chemical exfoliators.

Watermelon moisturizer and plum serum. (Courtesy of Glow Recipe)

Chang, who was born in Korea and spent her childhood in Louisiana and teenage years in Australia, considers herself a lifelong translator of culture and consumer habits. After attending college in the US, she started a career in marketing at L'Oréal Korea's Seoul headquarters. There she helped turn Kiehl's, an American brand owned by L'Oréal, into a top player in Korea's hyper-competitive beauty market.

In 2008, Chang moved to New York and began a master's program in East Asian studies at Columbia with plans to become a translator of Korean novels. But she missed the cosmetics industry and after graduating decided to join the global-marketing team at Kiehl's in New York. She says her education was a huge asset: "Columbia taught me how to really look at cultural nuances and translate them between different cultures, and I felt like I could apply that knowledge."

At the time, "K-beauty" was on the cusp of exploding into an international phenomenon. "Global companies were starting to look to Korea for the latest skin-care trends and innovations," says Chang. Sensing a business opportunity, she connected with her friend and L'Oréal colleague Sarah Lee, who is also Korean (and whose grandmother also used watermelon as a skin salve). Over sheet masks and wine one evening, they came up with the idea for Glow Recipe. "We were both bicultural, bilingual, and uniquely positioned to translate Korean trends for the US market," says Chang.

Christine Chang (right) and Sarah Lee. (Courtesy of Glow Recipe)

Glow Recipe started out as an e-commerce company for existing Korean cosmetics. Chang and Lee would scout out the best cruelty-free products and sell them on their

website. In 2015, they appeared on the ABC reality show *Shark Tank* and landed — but ultimately turned down — a $425,000 investment.

In the spring of 2017, Glow Recipe introduced its own product line. The first offerings, a blueberry cleanser and watermelon sleeping mask, were instant hits at Sephora. “The mask comes in a jar that’s shaped like a melting ice cube, an homage to our grandmothers and the chilled watermelon,” says Chang. The product, which initially generated a waitlist of more than five thousand people, is still a bestseller.

Chang attributes much of Glow Recipe’s success to the strong community it has built online. “People are increasingly enjoying skin care on social-media platforms,” she says. The company produces a wide range of content for YouTube and Instagram on everything from dealing with breakouts to the magic of enzymes to the secrets of hydrated, “bouncy” skin.

Though K-beauty is in the midst of a viral moment, Chang doesn’t believe it’s a passing fad. She sees it as more of an ongoing movement. “If a brand as established as Neutrogena is launching a water-boost gel cream, or Burt’s Bees is selling sheet masks, you know that Korean influence has trickled down throughout the industry,” she says.

Through Glow Recipe, Chang hopes to educate people about skin-care techniques and convey to the world that there’s more to K-beauty than cutesy packaging and exotic-sounding ingredients. “K-beauty is a philosophy,” she says. “It’s about having a self-care routine that you look forward to. It’s about skin care being joyful and fun.”

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