

INSIDER
flower
CHILD

A visit to Tata Harper's farm in Vermont prompts Mishal Cazmi to consider the meaning of natural beauty.

IN THE SUMMER months, Vermont transforms from a ski sanctuary into a verdant wonderland with an abundance of greenery and infinite blue skies. When I arrive in late August with Hunters in tow, it's not for a summer sojourn but for a visit to Tata Harper, an organic, all-natural beauty brand that's headquartered on 1,200 acres of lush farmland in the Champlain Valley. The 90-minute journey from the city of Burlington is the perfect time to take in this other side of Vermont, traversing long, winding roads where the trees are backlit by sunlight and the mountains cast sloping silhouettes against Lake Champlain.

Tata Harper, a whimsical, Wes Anderson-sounding moniker, also happens to be the name of the brand's founder, who resides on a farm—named Julius Kingdom—with her husband, Henry, three kids (Hunter Laurence, Grace Paloma and Tata Mia, ages five, four and two), a pack of rescue dogs and various other animals. It's where many of her ingredients are grown, manufactured and packaged, and she has a hand in it all. But don't let the decidedly remote and seemingly small operation fool you. The brand has a vast fan base that includes staffers at *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*, models and makeup artists and celebrities like Gwyneth Paltrow, Jessica Alba and Christy Turlington.

The picturesque setting didn't exactly have a fairy-tale beginning. The 38-year-old Colombian-born Harper's foray into skincare came after her stepfather was diagnosed with cancer. His doctor advised her to consider switching his personal care products to all-natural alternatives that didn't contain synthetic chemicals. This revelation caused Harper to →

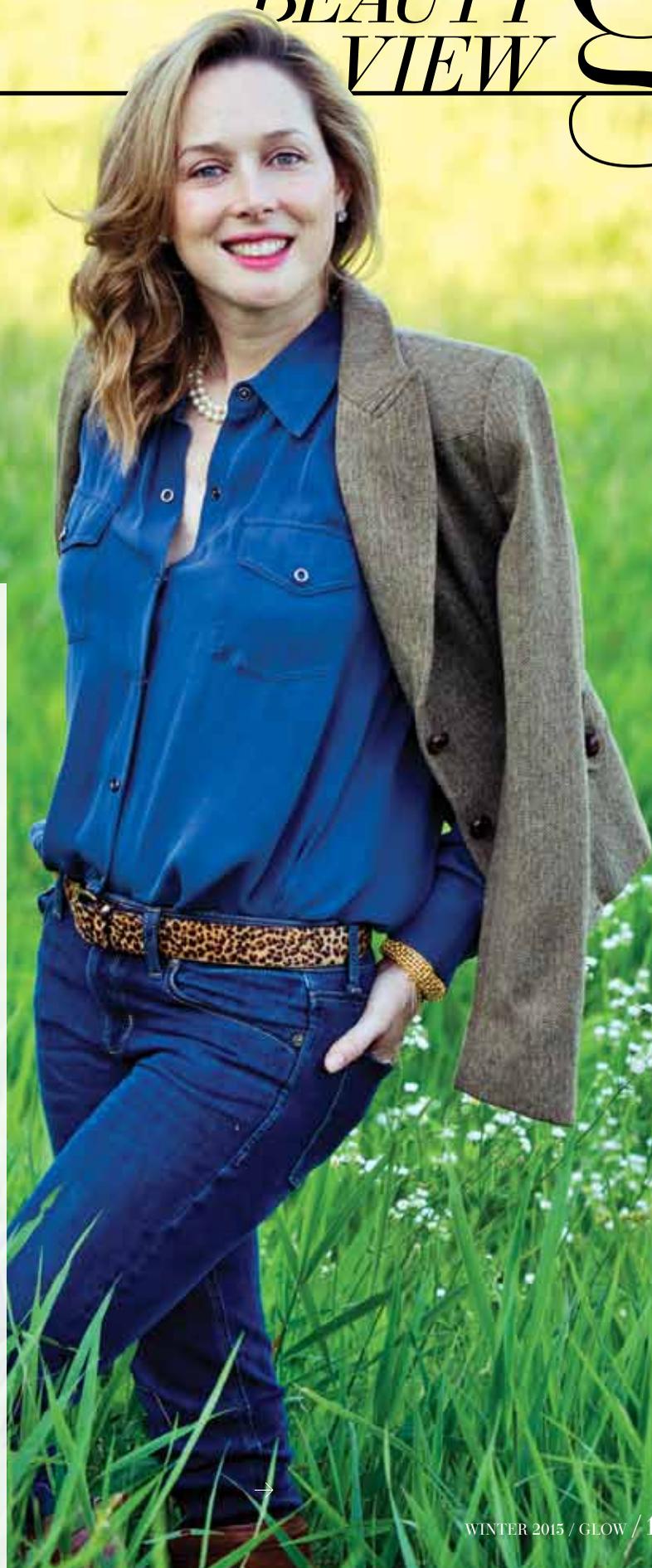


PHOTO: COURTESY OF TATA HARPER



Tata Harper on some of the brand's best-sellers

- **Resurfacing Mask, \$68**

"If you're a busy person who doesn't have time for masks, I recommend you use it while you exercise or do hot yoga. I put it on on Saturday morning and then make breakfast for my kids. It's transparent, so you don't see it."

- **Hydrating Floral Essence, \$80 for 50 ml**

"It's one of our most requested products with makeup artists because they love prepping skin with it. I use it throughout the day, whenever I'm feeling dry and I have makeup on and can't use moisturizer."

- **Fortifying Body Lotion, \$84**

"It is like a serum for your body. It's all about firming, lifting and improving the look of spider veins in your body. I tend to mix it with body oil at night and create a cocktail in my hands before applying it all over, especially in the winter."

All available at murale.ca



re-evaluate her own medicine cabinet and, after her search for effective natural alternatives proved fruitless, she decided to take matters into her own hands.

I arrive at the main headquarters, a former dairy barn converted into a working space. Her office is cavernous, and the natural light floods in to illuminate the antique furniture (antiquing is one of her favourite hobbies, I quickly learn) and framed pictures of her family and friends. Her desk is incredibly organized—neatly stacked papers, lined-up vials of unlabelled products and a berry-hued smoothie in a Mason jar (she makes them for herself and her kids every morning).

She greets me warmly in dressed-down jeans and a plaid button-down shirt, radiating the trademark Tata Harper glow that has beauty editors and bloggers everywhere buzzing. Harper speaks with a musical lilt, her Colombian accent slipping through as we talk. She was born and raised in Barranquilla, where beauty was considered a way of life. "My grandmother loved making primitive concoctions such as oatmeal masks and honey masks for the hair," she recalls. "My mom bought me and my sister our first products when we were 12 years old so we could start cleansing and moisturizing."

Her stepfather's diagnosis spurred Harper to take beauty seriously and really start thinking about the possibility of creating her own skincare line. It happened to coincide with a time when she and her husband—both then living in Miami and working in commercial real estate—were looking to invest in a new property, and pastoral Vermont caught their eye. What was originally supposed to be a weekend retreat soon became a permanent residence and a new beginning for the Harpers.

Harper, whose background was in industrial engineering (not beauty), sought green chemists, botanists, scientists, herbalists and aromatherapists for insight. "Aromatherapists are specifically knowledgeable about essential oils, and herbalism is about the use of herbs and stems and flowers," she explains. "You need scientists with different backgrounds so you can have a well-rounded product

that encompasses many sciences within the natural realm." Harper's industrial engineering degree proved more than useful in her new vocation, allowing her to understand the science and look at everything with a critical eye. She spent a few years

formulating the line before it was officially launched in 2010. Today, her namesake brand is available worldwide.

When we get into a discussion about green beauty, Harper explains: "For us, being natural means everything grows from the earth. It comes from a plant or a mineral and it wasn't started in a lab."

When she first began conceiving the brand 10 years ago, Harper found that natural products weren't as effective as their synthetic counterparts. In fact, when it came to high-performing ingredients, the category was limited to jojoba and avocado oils. Her goal was to create green products that worked as well as any skincare items you'd find at a cosmetics counter.

The Tata Harper line launched to an almost immediate buzz. While the products are on the pricier side (the most expensive item at Murale is the Elixir Vitae, a topical Botox-style treatment for your face that costs a cool \$448), she didn't have trouble convincing customers to buy them. The high-quality ingredients justified the price tag. Each product boasts anywhere from nine to 38 active ingredients—many sourced right from her garden.

Harper takes me on a tour of that Instagram-worthy garden, which sits across from the family home. A few minutes' drive away from the main office, its riot of colours is a happy sight. This year, they're growing meadowsweet, arnica, calendula, lavender and alfalfa. Harper has an encyclopedic knowledge of their properties: "Alfalfa is great for oxygenation of the skin. Calendula is good for soothing and calming. Meadowsweet has a really high content of salicylic acid."

The rest of the ingredients (sourced from 54 countries at last count) read more like offerings on an exotic menu: stem cells from Israel and France, daffodils from Crete and lavender from Barcelona. The most impressive (and costly) is hyaluronic acid made from sweet potato that's sourced from the Czech Republic.

From her home, we hop on a golf cart and as she skillfully navigates the green terrain back to the main office, I'm struck by how much the farm is an inextricable part of who she is and the products to which she lends her name. I decide that Tata Harper is a living embodiment of her brand, the Martha Stewart of natural beauty. Back home, I religiously spritz on the Hydrating Floral Essence, a facial mist that tightens, tones and hydrates. With every fragrant spritz, I'm reminded that Tata Harper the brand is as much of a sensorial experience as her farm was in Vermont. ☺