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Vinotherapy: Grape's Beauty Marc

BY: DENISE REYNOLDS

The French started it. In Bordeaux of all places. And now the fruit of the vine is making a splash in the spa world with vinotherapy—treatments based upon grape seeds, grape skins, and wine.

As far back as the 17th Century, Louis XIV, France's famed Sun King, used grapes in skin care treatments, applying aged wine to the face to create a radiant complexion. But it was Joseph Vercauteren, a pharmacology professor from Bordeaux University, who fathered the concept of using the grape for skin care products. During a 1993 visit to Chateau Smith Haut Lafitte to see wine being made, he asked why the estate was throwing away the most beneficial parts of the grapes—the grape seeds and skins left over after the pressing.

Known as the marc, these remnants of the winemaking process contain polyphenols—antioxidants that his research showed were 10,000 times stronger than Vitamin E and 50 times more effective. Thinking outside the glass, he developed a way to stabilize the same molecules of tannin that give age-worthy wine its staying power. Famed for fighting skin-aging free radicals generated by modern-day enemies like sun exposure, pollution, and cigarette smoke, these grape warriors can become part of a balanced beauty arsenal.

Wine seems to go to the very heart of what ails us. A Harvard University study suggests that one glass of red wine a day can reduce heart attacks in women by 25 percent. Dr. Fredric Brandt, Miami dermatologist extraordinaire, considers grape seed extract to be the most powerful natural antioxidant, crediting it with retarding, and even reversing skin damage, and slowing the aging process.

For a taste of vinotherapy, I visited The Bathhouse at Calistoga Ranch, an Auberge Resort in Napa Valley. Nestled in a private canyon amid majestic hills, ancient oaks, and a rock-hewn stream, The Bathhouse serves up an entire menu of vinotherapy treatments using Napa Valley Spa Products. This exceptional line of grape seed-based oils, lotions, teas, and scrubs is made from the seeds of 42 premium

Napa Valley wineries, cold-pressed to produce an extra virgin grape seed oil.

In a nod to the harvest in process in the valley at the time of my visit, I opted for the Vineyard Crush treatment. If desired, a Cabernet Wine Bath, which promotes healthy and glowing skin, can be added to the beginning of this treatment. While I got comfortable on the table in my luxuriously rustic massage cabin, my therapist coated me with a thin layer of grape seed crush body scrub. The aroma that permeates the valley during harvest enveloped me. Circular motions reminiscent of the individual grapes that comprise a ripe berry cluster were expertly paired with long strokes, simulating the release of the clusters from the vine and exfoliating my skin with every move. To avoid transferring the scrub's intense color to my skin, the palms of my hands and the soles of my feet had to abstain.

After using a loofah glove to remove most of the scrub from my body, the therapist told me that he was preparing a warm shower for me so that I could rinse off any that remained. Connected to my treatment room I found a magnificent outdoor shower where cascading water awaited, allowing me to bask in the radiant sunlight in complete privacy. Wrapped in warm, fluffy towels, I returned to my room. Moments later, my therapist reappeared and completed the vinotherapy treatment with a restorative massage using lavender grape seed oil.

As I retired to the outdoor relaxation room and settled into an overstuffed chair in front of the crackling fire, I could see Napa's famed vineyards in the distance. My appreciation for the goodness of the vine had grown. Nary a drop had touched my lips. But through the wonders of vinotherapy, I felt connected to the bountiful harvest. Now that's a wine country experience that even a teetotaler could love.

Spa specialist Denise Reynolds, whose column "Spa Pleasures" brings you reports on spa treatments from around the world, invites you to visit www.spapleasures.com for more information on the pleasures that await you at today's spas. Copyright © 2005