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Tailor Skincare owner Sara Quilter shares the secrets to healthy skin and reveals what it means to be a natural beauty brand

Skincare doesn't need to be complicated. In fact, taking time to apply our products is meant to be one of those rare moments of serenity that we get in our day. But, somewhere in between buying our first tube of moisturiser and realising we'd need a PhD in chemistry to understand ingredient lists, things became a little overwhelming. Throw terms like 'chemical-free' and 'miracle ingredient' into the mix and it becomes a dizzying extravaganza.

But that's exactly what led Sara Quilter to create Tailor Skincare. Sara's skin health journey began as a teenager when she struggled to find effective products to handle her acne. And her interest in developing a successful, naturally derived, vegan skincare range only grew as she completed a degree and began working in the biotech industry.

First launched in 2013, Tailor Skincare is now an award-winning skincare brand known for its high efficacy and clean, science-based ingredients. As the New Zealand-favourite launches in Australia at the Discover New Pop Up Store in Chadstone, Melbourne, Sara speaks with us about what it means to be a 'natural' skincare brand and shares her top tips to perfecting your skincare routine.

Can you tell us a bit about your skincare journey and what led you to the creation of your own line?

My skin health journey began as a teenager, I suffered a bit from acne and I was prescribed a low-dose antibiotic for a long time. It absolutely destroyed my gut health, which was not ideal. I'd never been warned about the dangers of long-term antibiotic use and how that could have a detrimental impact on your gut health and that was sort of the catalyst for when it all began. My skin did improve, but it wasn't fixed, and after I stopped taking the medication the acne came back. I would just spend countless sums of money on skincare hoping for this clear, glowing skin, but nothing really worked.

In 2011 I had just finished my Postgraduate Science Degree in New Zealand when an opportunity arose for me to go to California and work for a biotech start-up in Grass Valley. So, I had the chance to be a part of the biotech scene but also to learn about starting a business from the ground up. Then I just started to question the products that we use every day, what goes into these products? What are some of the chemicals that are used and are there questions about the safety around them?

I was already obsessed with skincare from my teenage acne days and so I took this deep dive into what makes great skincare, from a lens of how to formulate skincare using natural ingredients first. When I moved back to New Zealand, I invested my savings and started the business. With Tailor Skincare, as a brand, I've always made sure we're focused on myth-busting - to bring transparency to what was quite a secretive industry a few years back. We're on a mission to change the face of beauty by creating clean, science-based natural skincare and by always putting product efficacy and education at the heart of our business.

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Why was it important for you to use naturally derived ingredients and can you tell us how you define 'natural' skincare?

It's a great question because there is so much grey area when it comes to 'natural' skincare - what is natural? We use the ISO standard definition of natural, so it means naturally derived. [The ingredient] has to be derived through a certain type of process, so you can have an ingredient that doesn't exist in nature by itself, but is naturally derived. Kind of like xanthan gum, which is fermented from corn.

As for why it's important to me, nature is so intelligent, you know? There's so much more to these natural ingredients that we don't understand. Nature has created this complex network of, well of everything, and so I like to look at the benefits of these ingredients and the complexity of them.

You've also spoken out about greenwashing on your website, which is something we often see in the skincare industry where a brand might claim to be "chemical-free" or say they use "clean" ingredients without providing information about what that means. Was it also important to you to make education a part of the brand?

Absolutely! Because chemicals get a really hard time. People say they want to avoid chemicals in their skincare but, sorry, water is a chemical. Education is really important to me because that's how I started the business, taking a deep dive and educating myself. I don't like the wool being pulled over anyone's eyes so I wanted to be super transparent about what we're doing as a business and why. And to be technically correct, as well.

So, are there any specific 'naturally derived' ingredients that you're really excited about?

Absolutely! One of our hero products is Tailor Renew, which is a probiotic-based serum - it's a probiotic lysate. So what that essentially means is that the probiotic has been cultured, like what you would find in cheese or kefir, except our range is vegan, so the probiotic has been cultured using glucose as a source.

It's a very exciting ingredient because it essentially helps to stimulate the skin's renewal process, hence the name Tailor Renew, and it does that by stimulating the skin's natural peptide production. You get this increase of peptide production in the skin and peptides are fantastic because they are the building blocks of protein. So, if you get a peptide that binds amino acids together, and if you get a bunch of amino acids together, they fold up and become a protein. If you think of the two key structural proteins in the skin, collagen and elastin, when you're stimulating the building blocks of these it's going to help with the skin's renewal and provide beneficial anti-ageing results. It's also been found to help reduce pro-inflammatory cytokines - which means it's actually quite helpful when it comes to breakout-prone skin as well. It's one of those exciting products where, if you're wanting a great anti-ageing product but you're also prone to breakouts and you don't want to use anti-ageing creams that can be quite heavy on the skin, then it's great for that in-between.

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There was probably a long list of ingredients you didn't want to include. But was there any particular ingredient you absolutely didn't want to include in your products?

Yeah, definitely! I mean your classic parabens, definitely - why are they bad? I like to know why. Parabens are a very, very effective preservative and they are fantastic at keeping a product preserved so that it doesn't grow any yeast, mould or bacteria, which is very important, but the reason we didn't include parabens is because they have a xenoestrogen effect and can mimic estrogen in the body. So you might wonder, why is that bad if estrogen is a natural hormone? It's because balance is really important and if your body becomes estrogen dominant or has too much in it, it can result in all kinds of mood swings, fatigue, lack of sleep, struggling to lose weight and more. What happens as well is that if you have too much estrogen in your body it also loads your liver, which is going to have to process that, but your body is going to prioritise materials like alcohol, coffee and more. And I'm not saying I don't love coffee or wine! But it's everything in balance. So I just wanted to have skincare that reduces your toxic load, and removing parabens from the skincare helps to do that.

People are becoming much more knowledgeable about skincare. They know the names of individual ingredients and concoct some pretty hefty routines, which is great! But it does also mean there are a lot of self-appointed experts online sharing opinions. What are your thoughts on how social media and the internet has changed the way we view skincare?

That's a really good question, it's exciting and amazing that we can go out and Google all the things under the sun - but I guess Google will tell you that this material is both fantastic and also the worst thing in the world. Articles will say both things. I guess, from my time at university, I like to look at multiple sources that have some credibility behind them. Who is producing this piece of information and are multiple, credible sources saying the same thing? Then you're probably on the right track. But I like to see the self-made authorities coming at it from a very unemotive, non-scare-mongering perspective.

"Healthy skin" has become a prominent topic of conversation for skincare lovers lately, especially now as more of us seem to be overdoing it with chemical exfoliants or struggling with skin problems from wearing face masks through COVID. Above anything else, should healthy skin always be the main goal?

Yep - absolutely! Keep your skin healthy and keep your body healthy, your skin is the blueprint of what is going on with the rest of your body. What's going on top of your skin can be irritating, but equally what's going into your skin can play a role, too, and it's been a massively stressful time for everybody in the world and that can just wreak havoc on our skin and manifest in other ways. And if we see what's happening on our skin and try to combat that with an acid, which stresses the skin out, it can result in all kinds of bad things.

As we're heading into winter in Australia and New Zealand, do you recommend people try to alter their skincare routine seasonally?

Your skin does change when you go into different climates. In hotter climates, you sweat more and produce more oil, so when you go into winter the reverse can obviously happen where you're not producing much sweat or oil. Your skin has a protective layer called the acid mantle, which is made from your skin's good bacteria - and bad bacteria too depending on what's going on with your skin - but also, your sweat and oil. So it can sometimes become compromised in the colder months. So for me, when the winter rolls around, I want to use more oil-based products to really lock in moisture and defend my skin and in the summer I'll go a bit lighter and use more water-based products.

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There's a bit of conflicting advice about whether you should layer your oil on top of moisturiser or vice versa - which camp do you fall into?

Moisturiser, then oil, because you want to be putting the lighter, more water-based product on first and then lock in with oil. But to be honest, I'm getting Annabelle (Sara's eight-month-old daughter) ready, and I'm like I'm just going to put it all in my hand, mix together and put it on. I know the theory but in practice, I just slap it on!

Definitely! Whatever gets you out the door quickest. Now, it's hard to build a sweeping skincare routine when everyone's skin is different... But, generally, if someone is keen to step up their game and build up a routine, what are your tips?

Yes, good question. It definitely depends on your skin type and whether you are prone to oiliness or dryness. But as a general sort of evening routine, let's just say if you were quite normal and had a bit of oiliness, you would remove your makeup with a cleanser - I like to use an oil cleanser because it doesn't strip the skin of its acid mantle - then I would also follow with an exfoliant once or twice a week. Then go from your lightest weight product to your heaviest. So, for me, I use the whole Tailor Skincare range, I would use the Tailor Hydrate Serum (so, your hyaluronic acid serum) and then I would use the Tailor Renew (probiotic serum) and then I would use Tailor Moisture (water-based) and Tailor Illume (oil-based). For event prep, I would incorporate Tailor Gold Dust, which is our Vitamin C powder.

Yes! Can you tell us a bit more about this, because you don't often see a Vitamin C product in powder form...

Yes! So Vitamin C, as ascorbic acid, is a very unstable material. There are a few different Vitamin C derivatives available and you run this balance between stability and bioavailability. So, ascorbic acid is super bio-available to the skin but it's quite unstable, whereas you have others that are really stable in a formulation but they're not as bio-available, because what they have to do is then change back to ascorbic acid when it hits the skin, but sometimes that doesn't really happen so you're not really getting the benefit from your Vitamin C based product. If you've got a Vitamin C serum that's pre-mixed and you've used ascorbic acid as the Vitamin C, when you're putting that on your skin it's got a life cycle of about 48 hours to one week. If you think about the time it took for that product to be manufactured, then sent out to the shop and then purchased by you, it takes longer than seven days. So, you're not necessarily going to be gaining much benefit from the actual Vitamin C ingredient in your serum, unless it's got a specific formulation - there are some lipo-spheric Vitamin C products out there that are quite exciting. By having it in the powder form, it allows you to mix the powder and activate the Vitamin C right when you need to apply it to your skin.

There's a big focus on acne on your website and across social media. What do you think are some common misconceptions when it comes to treating acne with skincare?

I think it's - everybody is different - but I would say one of the main things is that there has been an obsession with stripping the skin of all of the oils it produces and just naming oils as being the bad guy. But if you're stripping the skin of oil every day you are essentially signalling to the skin that it's out of oil and, for one person that might completely dry their skin out, but for another it could signal to the skin that it needs to produce more. So you're in a cycle of constantly fighting oil production and acne. That can be one common misconception, but it's not applicable to everyone. It really is a unique journey for everybody.

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Another focus seems to be on ageing skin and making sure it's being treated well, rather than negatively placing focus on wrinkles or lines. What are your thoughts, generally, around anti-ageing messaging and how you wanted it to play into your brand?

I think it comes back to the importance of healthy skin - I just want beautiful, healthy skin. Ageing is a fact of life but if we can apply products that are going to give our skin resilience to defend itself from the sun and pollution that we're exposed to on a daily basis, then I want to put products on my skin that will do that. But as well, you are beautiful at any age, with lines and wrinkles, and it doesn't make you any less beautiful than someone who is younger.

Definitely, and with your product descriptions and the imagery you use, it doesn't play into that sort of messaging we often see, where a 20-year-old model is used to sell a night cream targeted towards 50-year-olds...

Right? It's that classic like, let's create a problem - ageing and wrinkles - and sell you the solution, using something unattainable because that model doesn't look like herself, either, with photoshop and everything. We've been putting out a few videos on our social channels - and it was a bit confronting but I wanted to do it - of me, with no filter or anything, really harsh light where you can see everything. But it's like, that's real. It's still beautiful skin and that's how you see people in real life.

Absolutely, you can see how the authenticity of your message matches with the products. One of the major ways in which you can see how your brand is walking the walk, is with compostable refills. You're not just saying you believe in sustainability, but actively working towards it with the option to purchase a refill for some products once you finish your first bottle. Can you tell us a bit more about how you've worked towards this...

With the refills, it's an ongoing work in progress. We've released our compostable refills option and they are very much made to order. We are closely monitoring the sales side of those because the plastic inside is compostable and when you put a water-based material into a compostable plastic it's got a shorter shelf-life than it does when it comes in a bottle. So, it's a very finely tuned operation at the moment, but it's so important to us to be able to reduce waste by having a completely compostable, home-compostable, option so you don't have to repurchase the bottle. However, they are a bit high-maintenance and a bit special, but our customers are really, really enjoying that option. So, it's a work in progress but why not put it out there and see how it works for our customers? We love it.