



HOW BORDEAUX BEAUTY BRAND CAUDALIE TAPPED INTO WORLD COSMETICS

SOUNDS FRENCH TASTES DIFFERENT

TOP-OF-THE-BARREL skincare

By OONAGH PHILLIPS

Bertrand and Mathilde Thomas, the husband and wife team that founded the Caudalie beauty brand, may not have had much initial capital, but they certainly had an engaging story – a brand with its roots in a Bordeaux vineyard – which they used to communicate the appeal of French art de vivre. Few beauty brands have managed to associate a product range with a particular lifestyle so well. Another rare example is L'Occitane, which has made an international name for itself through a “philosophy based on the colors, smells and flavours of France’s Provence region.” The company, which was founded in 1976, now generates revenues of €240 million by selling olive-based moisturizers and lavender body lotions. Caudalie looks well on its way to replicating

L'Occitane’s success. Today, just 13 years after the products hit the market, the firm claims the number-one slot in the anti-dark spot cosmetics category and ranks second in the anti-ageing skincare sector of France’s pharmacy distribution channel. The company also operates subsidiaries in 10 countries and has estimated sales of more than €50m.

The Caudalie story began in 1993. It was during the grape harvest of that year that Mathilde and Bertrand Thomas were introduced to polyphenols, the ingredient behind the multi-million dollar beauty brand. “I was touring my parents’ vineyard, the Chateau Smith Haut Lafitte in Bordeaux, with a university researcher. He took one look at the barrel of grape

seeds and stems that were to be discarded, and said we were throwing treasure away,” recounts Mathilde Thomas. These precious dregs were filled with the grape-seed polyphenols, which according to research published in the British medical journal *The Lancet*, are 10,000 times more powerful than vitamin E in fighting the free radicals that cause skin ageing. This prompted the couple to meet Dr Vercauteren, a professor at the pharmacy faculty of Bordeaux University, who was working on a patent to stabilize grape polyphenols for use in cosmetics. Even though they were only twenty years old, still at school, had no practical business experience and just €150 000 in start-up capital, the future associates quickly signed a contract with the professor and announced their plans to launch the Caudalie beauty business. The Thomases attribute Caudalie’s success to the originality

Gutsatz credits Caudalie and its owners with being avant-garde on a second level: the opening of the *Vinothérapie* spa in Bordeaux. The idea for the spa came about when Mathilde’s parents decided to open an *hôtel de charme* on their property. “Why not offer guests spa treatments using Caudalie products?” Mathilde thought. The spa opened in 1999 and was intended to be a luxurious haven of relaxation providing treatments based on the benefits of wine and grapes – *vinothérapie*. “With the spa, the young entrepreneurs capitalized on the idea of wine and *vinothérapie*, an idea that is associated with the French lifestyle. This makes the brand not just a product range, but a concept,” says Gutsatz. Caudalie now has three franchised and three wholly owned spas. The latter category includes the spa at the Marqués de Riscal, the Frank Gehry-designed hotel in Spain’s Rioja

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of the product. Unlike other cosmetic brands that often confuse consumers by offering a baffling mix of vitamins, minerals and plant products, all of Caudalie’s formulae are based on the grape or the vine. “Caudalie is avant-garde in its focus on an ingredient that was never used before in cosmetics; it’s simple, positive and appeals to consumers,” explains Michel Gutsatz, co-founder of Paris-based brand strategy consultancy *The Scriptorium Company*. Even the brand name has cachet: the term *caudalie*, as any oenologist, or wine expert will tell you, refers to how long a wine’s flavour lingers in the mouth – the better the wine, the more *caudalie* it has.

Mathilde is at pains to point out that Caudalie’s product line, which now includes cleansing, energising and anti-dark spot ranges, as well as slimming and suncare items, also incorporates real technological innovation in the form of patented molecules: “What differentiates us is the quality of our research and our patents. We were the first brand to put resveratrol (a molecule that stimulates cellular renewal) in a product. Brands such as Estée Lauder and Dior didn’t come up with this until ten years after us,” she says with a smile. Another pioneering move was the brand’s decision to offer a more natural product. The company removed parabens from its products in 2005 – something most brands are only now beginning to think about.

province and a centre at the upscale Plaza Hotel on New York’s Fifth Avenue, which opened in October. The 800 m2 New York spa, with 14 cabins, may not be nestled in a vineyard like those in Bordeaux and Spain, but the brand’s grape heritage is much in evidence. A unique feature is the spa’s wine bar, which stocks 500 wines from around the world. Here, between treatments patrons can sip a fine vintage and nibble on specially chosen delicacies: a 12-month old Comté cheese and organic almonds with a glass of Château Smith Haut Lafitte, or a plate of pata negra ham to accompany a Rioja. The spa has already welcomed Arab princes and a string of Hollywood actresses including Sigourney Weaver, who was so bowled over by the experience that she declared she was ready to become a Caudalie spokesperson. The firm’s move into the spa market in 1999 coincided with the beginning of France’s spa boom. France came relatively late to the spa trend compared with other countries, but has quickly made up for lost ground. There are now hundreds of small single-outlet spas dotted around the country, as well as

Right page: BOWL OF GRAPE SEEDS, CAUDALIE FOUNDERS MATHILDE & BERTRAND THOMAS, GRAPE PULP ‘FRICTION’ SCRUB





“THE SPAS ARE REALLY THE JEWEL, MY HAUTE COUTURE SHOW”

mid-sized spa networks, such as La Sultane de Saba or Cinq Mondes, which have also expanded abroad. Spas have now become de rigueur for French luxury hotels (akin to the importance indoor swimming pools took on for hotels 25 years ago) and for established high-end beauty brands. Companies such as Lancôme, Givenchy and Dior all have a spa presence, mostly in luxury hotels. Dior for example inaugurated a branded spa at Paris’ chic Plaza Athénée hotel on the avenue Montaigne in September. For many companies, including Caudalie, spas are more important for brand image and generating publicity than for sales volumes. “The spas are really the jewel, my haute couture show, and we want to do few, but very well. The main business, however, comes from product sales,” Mathilde comments. Indeed, product sales represent 98% of the company’s total turnover, and it is this side of the business that the Thomases want to expand. Caudalie products are sold predominantly through pharmacies – an astute choice of distribution channel. “We chose this retail channel as we had a patent from a university pharmacy faculty, so it would be simple to explain to pharmacists. It is also an independent network, which is easier for a start-up, and it doesn’t claim the big margins that the perfumery chains do,” explains Mathilde. Building the pharmacy distribution at the beginning was a long process, which involved Bertrand Thomas hitting the road to convince hundreds of individual pharmacists to sell Caudalie (he is a “damned good salesman” according to his wife), while

Mathilde met beauty editors to whip up free publicity for the brand. The strategy bore fruit. “They had to take a long and laborious road with pharmacies, but Caudalie now has an extremely solid network, and it’s not subject to the whims of the big chains,” says an executive from a competing beauty brand. The company has a leading position in the pharmacy retail channel in France, and the goal is to repeat this success in other countries. But this will be done at a slow and steady pace. Caudalie was burned on the international front in the early years, by moving into the US too soon (in 1997, just two years after the products were introduced) and launching in the far-flung markets of Japan and Australia before they were ready. “We were young and said yes to everything. These were errors of youth. If I had to do it again, I’d build the brand in Europe first before going farther afield,” says Mathilde.

Despite these errors, the couple has managed to create a strong international business, with exports accounting for 30 per cent of sales. The brand now plans to consolidate its subsidiaries, expand its distribution in European markets such as Germany, Italy and Spain, and become the pharmacists’ “darling” in these markets. The Thomases certainly appear to have the determination and entrepreneurial flair to pull this off. ■

Above: ‘FRENCH PARADOX’ WINE LOUNGE AND A TREATMENT CABIN AT THE CAUDALIE PLAZA, NEW YORK



DIVINE EXPERIENCE

An initiation into the ‘art of the vine’ awaits visitors to Les Sources de Caudalie, the luxury resort in the heart of the Château Smith Haut Lafitte vineyard, Bordeaux. The initiation rite should begin with a visit to the Caudalie Vinothérapie spa, perhaps after taking time to admire the impressive Bordeaux countryside and beautifully restored chateau. Upon entering the 2,400m² spa, constructed from pale wood and white stone, the visitor is offered red vine herbal tea and bowls of grapes, putting them immediately in the vinothérapie mood. After a few moments’ relaxation on the chaise longue, perfectly positioned beside a large window with a view over the surrounding vines, and a quick dip in the pool filled with hot water from the source 540 metres below, it’s time for the spa treatment.

The spa offers a range of massages, baths and body wraps. One of the most tempting is the 100 per cent grape ritual. It combines three of the brand’s exclusive treatments: a red vine bath – a sort of hydro massage with red vine extracts and essential oils; a honey and wine wrap, which involves the application of hot wine yeast and honey to the body, and a crushed Cabernet scrub, a body scrub with grape-seeds, honey and brown sugar. The spa’s signature barrel bath is also worth a try. Here guests can have a scalp massage while relaxing in a large bubbling bath laced with finely crushed grape seed, stem extracts and

essential oils. The quality of the massages is excellent and the therapists go out of their way to make their clients feel at ease. Talk of red vine baths and crushed Cabernet scrubs will no doubt bring on a thirst. The next stop should be the hotel to avail oneself of the free wine-tasting session – before heading to the resort’s gastronomic restaurant, La Grand’Vigne. The restaurant, which is designed to look like an 18th century orangerie offers two types of cuisine: gourmand for *Plaisir total* and a low-calorie option, *Aux Sources de la Minceur* (The Slimming Source). Chef Frank Salein has come up with a creative twist to traditional French fare. Starters include crispy langoustine in a light chestnut and truffle broth, a medley of foie gras and caviar from the Gironde, and marinated scallops with pumpkin. The main dishes are equally tempting, whether it’s the pigeon with chestnut purée or glazed sea bass in a grape jus with small stuffed white onions. Lest you forget you’re dining in the middle of a vineyard, you can finish up with warm Sauternes soufflé and grape sorbet. And all this of course can be washed down with the finest wines – the restaurant cellar has 15,000 to choose from. It is the sort of initiation that would make any visitor want to become an aficionado.

Above: BORDEAUX SPA, THE JAPANESE POOL