

Czech this out : European transplant creates natural skin care products

By MARILYN MCMAHON NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER
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Ask Lenka Tinka what's her favorite room in her house, and her reply is unexpected.

"The bathroom. It's where I keep all my favorite things - my soaps, my lotions, my perfumes. I can build a house around the bathtub. It's who I am," she said. "As a teenager, I tried it all - yogurt for the face, egg whites and oatmeal, too. And, of course, mayo for the hair."

Since the blonde-haired Ms. Tinka, youthful and trim at the age of 40, started her own business in 2011, however, all the products in her bathroom in Summerland have the same label on them - Natura Culina, which means "nature's kitchen" in Latin.

"It also stands for a healthy lifestyle because my products are made of natural and certified organic ingredients that are carefully blended to create effective nourishing and natural products for your skin. There are no parabens, no sulfates, no artificial colors or synthetic emulsifiers - no toxic ingredients," emphasized Ms. Tinka during an interview on a sunny afternoon in the gazebo at Cafe Luna in Summerland.

Her products include everything from anti-aging regenerating facial oils to intricately made goat milk soaps that range in price from \$8 to \$45. Gift baskets can be purchased for \$45 to \$60. The items are available at local spas and other retail outlets.

"Goat milk is believed to be very nourishing and moisturizing for the skin. It makes a delicate creamy lather and blended with soothing lavender essential oil makes it a real treat for the skin," Ms. Tinka said.

A key ingredient in her products is shea butter, which is made from a nut that grows on a tree in Africa.

"Shea butter helps restore elasticity to the skin, helps heal cuts and burns without scarring, minimizes stretch marks and works great on razor burns, bumps and rashes," said Ms. Tinka. "It's an intense moisturizer, ideal for dry cracked skin and dry spots on elbows, heels and knees."

Natura Culina's Moisturizing Shea Butter is enriched with organic coconut oil, anti-aging rosehip seed oil and vitamin E.

"The butter leaves your skin silky smooth, hydrated and nourished. It's excellent to use after a shower or bath as a daily body moisturizing treatment," said Ms. Tinka.

Radiant testimony to her own beauty regimen, Ms. Tinka said she was born and grew up in the Czech Republic, outside of Carlsbad, one of central Europe's most famous natural spa cities.

"It was famous for its natural springs that helped cure digestive and female problems. People from all over the world came to drink from them and soak in them. Today, my homeland is famous for its luxury spas and beautiful women who still use ancient recipes based on the natural resources found there to maintain their exquisite skin," said Ms. Tinka, a resident of Santa Barbara since 1997.

Until the age of 17, she lived under Communist rule in what was then called Czechoslovakia.

"We became the Czech Republic, a democracy, in 1989 after the Velvet Revolution," she said, explaining it was called that because there was no violence in the overthrow of the Communist government.

"The most exciting change for me was that all the borders opened. We could travel anywhere we wanted to go. I loved going to the bath and body stores in western Germany. They were three and four stories tall. I spent hours there. I wanted to sleep there," said Ms. Tinka with a laugh.

After graduating from high school at the age of 15, she fulfilled her goal of earning a teaching credential at a four-year university and taught the Czech language, geography and physical education to middle-school students.

Two years later, Ms. Tinka was informed she had won her green card in the lottery to enter the United States.

"Moving to the United States was a dream come true. I never expected to win," she said.

Now divorced, Ms. Tinka, who was then 24, came with her husband to Miami, Fla., where a friend of her family offered a place to live temporarily.

"We jumped into the unknown. We didn't know any English. It was hot and humid," she recalled. "I got a job at The Roadhouse Grill, making salads. The first English (words) I learned were the names of salad ingredients."

"It was very frustrating not being able to communicate when I was fluent in Czech, German and Russian."

After six months in the sweltering heat of Miami, the couple decided to relocate to California "because I grew up watching 'Beverly Hills 90210' and had heard about Santa Barbara."

They flew to Los Angeles and took a bus to town, arriving at 2 a.m. on a chilly morning in November.

"It was freezing cold. We were in T-shirts and shorts. We bundled up with our beach towels and asked ourselves, 'What have we done?' The next day, we went to a thrift store and bought warm clothing," Ms. Tinka said.

A visit to Shoreline Park with its "breathtaking views" convinced her they had made the right move.

They rented a room at the State Street Hotel near the train station, and in two days, Ms. Tinka had a job at the Subway shop nearby for \$4.75 an hour.

"Three days later, I found out Wetzel's Pretzels in Paseo Nuevo was paying \$5.75 an hour, so I went to work there for eight months, always looking for something better," she said.

Working as a nanny for a family in Hope Ranch for two years proved a key move because she doubled her salary and learned to speak English.

"They had a 2-year-old boy, who was just learning to speak, and so was I," said Ms. Tinka, who had kind words to say about Tom Millikin, the manager of an apartment complex on East Anapamu Street, where they lived after moving out of the hotel room.

"Tom's wife is from the Czech Republic. He was very helpful, very supportive. He made an apartment available. He was incredible, the first of many people in town who have helped me in my incredible journey," she said.

With her background in physical education, Ms. Tinka, now fluent in English with her Czech accent, soon found jobs as a personal trainer at local fitness centers.

Today, she continues the work independently, spending most of her time with several high-profile clients who have their own fitness studios in their Montecito homes.

While on a trip to Maine with one of her clients in 2008, she began to explore the idea of starting her own line of organic skin care.

"I was surrounded by nature. It was so peaceful. I did research. It was the perfect time for blending, mixing and testing scents made with essential oils," said Ms. Tinka, adding that "the journey of coming to another country to live without knowing the language and to understand a new way of life took a while, but I felt I was in a stable situation."

"I had a job. I had wonderful people around me. I was respected for my work. I thought, 'Let's make my dream come true.'"

Ms. Tinka makes all her products in the garage at her home in Summerland.

"I started in the kitchen in a one-bedroom apartment, and now I'm in my garage," she said with a laugh. "I like to make the orders when they come in. It's definitely a challenge to keep the product fresh. This is not a product to be stored. It is to be used."

Describing herself as a "one-woman show who wishes there were 48 hours in a day," Ms. Tinka couldn't be happier.

"I want to tell people that coming to the United States has been an amazing journey. It is the country where dreams can come true if you are hardworking, passionate, consistent and committed to what you are doing. You can make a wonderful life for yourself."

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Where to buy

Alice's Nail Boutique, 1150 Coast Village Road #G, Montecito; 695-0800

Lola, 1221 Victoria Court, Suite #13, Santa Barbara; 845-5322

Lily, 1131 Coast Village Road, Montecito; 695-0625

Solace Salon & Spa, 1819 Cliff Drive, Suite E, Santa Barbara; 966-3366

Spa Del Mar, Fess Parker's Doubletree Resort, 633 E. Cabrillo Blvd.; 884-8540

Cashmir Beauty Lounge, 2430 Lillie Ave., Summerland; 969-2322

Indian Summers, 2275 Ortega Hill Road, Summerland; 969-1162

Susan Willis Ltd., 4488 Carpinteria Ave., Carpinteria; 684-5085

Blissful Place Wellness Spa & Learning Center, 1607 Mission Drive, Solvang; 691-9233

Picket Fences, 1588 Mission Drive, Solvang; 688-6559

Kava Gifts, 238 E. Ojai Ave., Ojai; 640-0491

New Leaf Day Spa, 321 E. Ojai Ave., Ojai; 640-9911



At top, Lenka Tinka luxuriates in a tub, pampering herself with bath and beauty products from her new line, Natura Culina. "I can build a house around the bathtub. It's who I am," said the native of the Czech Republic. Natura Culina products are carefully blended to create effective nourishing and natural products for the skin.

COURTESY PHOTOS



Above, a gift basket overflows with Natura Culina products. Below, among the products Ms. Tinka offers are Sugar Body Scrub, Shea Butter and Lavender Sugar Body Scrub with Chocolate Lavender. STEVE MALONE / NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS

