

Brenda Brock of Farmaesthetics: Five Things You Need To Know To Succeed In The Modern Beauty Industry

An Interview With Jilea Hemmings



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As part of our series about “Five Things You Need To Know To Succeed In The Modern Beauty Industry”, I had the pleasure of interviewing Brenda Brock.

Brenda Brock is the daughter of a 7th generation farming family from Texas with roots steeped in herbal traditions. Learning the craft of herbal formulation as a child led her to a lifelong passion that eventually became Farmaesthetics Fine Herbal Skincare from the Farm.

After completing studies at The University of Texas at Austin, where she received the Morton Brown Award for Acting, she moved to New York City. There her love of folklore, acting, storytelling and creative writing sparked a 10-year career as a produced playwright and actress.

Following four years on the ABC Daytime Drama, One Life to Live, and two Daytime Award nominations for Best Actress, Brenda longed to return to her rural roots. She moved to Rhode Island, restored an old Victorian farmhouse, started growing herbs and flowers and making her herbal skincare preparations.

She first offered her products to customers at an organic farmstand in the summer of 1999 in rural RI.

Today Farmaesthetics is available all over the world, including Saks, OH! Spa at Ocean House, Farmaesthetics Spa at Topping Rose House in Bridgehampton, NY and The Retreat at Castle Hill by Farmaesthetics, in Newport, RI.

Brenda's trailblazing work in "green" product and packaging design landed Farmaesthetics on the cover of Cosmetic/Personal Care Packaging Magazine for their leadership position in the natural category. The brand was named to Women's Wear Daily's "It List" of "The Green Brands Defining Organic Skincare" and Allure Magazine's list of the "Top 4 Natural Beauty Brands Today".

Ms. Brock's honors include being named to TIME Magazine's list of the "100 Most Influential People & Ideas Behind Green Design in Beauty" and one of the "Five Women at the Forefront of the Natural Product Revolution" by Luxury Spafinder. She was voted "Rhode Island's 2013 Small Businessperson of the Year" and has been a repeat guest on The Martha Stewart Show.

Thank you so much for doing this with us! Before we dive in, our readers would love to learn a bit more about you. Can you tell me a story about what brought you to this specific career path?

My path was personal for so many years — a lifelong passion and dedication to learning about herbs and flowers from those with traditional knowledge. It started when I was a little girl, observing the women in my aunt’s kitchen on the Brock family farm outside Austin, Texas.

From there, my career as founder, formulator, and CEO of Farmaesthetics began in 1999 at an organic farm stand in rural Rhode Island, where I first started selling my herbal preparations. Prior to that summer, I made skincare in my kitchen and gifted them to friends and family but after a successful summer at the farm stand, I realized I was onto something. People kept reaching out to order my creams, lotions, cleansers, tonics and salves, long after the summer season was over. There was a keen interest in what truly natural skincare was all about. Natural beauty had little reality to it at that time. Synthetics, chemicals, artificial fragrances, were not questioned in products then, even if claiming to be natural. In fact, natural could mean anything that had a flower on the label! I was excited by the interest and eager to reach more people to remind them how nature, beauty and self-care can intersect, and I wanted to address this in premium skincare, rather than health food store channels.

I gave my collection of products the name Farmaesthetics and took off to find a chemist and lab that would work with me to translate my recipes from 5x7 index cards into formulations for large batch production without changing a single ingredient or adding synthetics or artificial preservative systems. After nine months in the lab, we were successful. I had a full line of skincare

products and all the required certifications. I then realized that I had a business. I had not only formulated a natural skincare line but had also begun the business of branding and building a company. I was the accidental entrepreneur, with no business background at that point, only a love of traditions, knowledge, herbs and flowers, and a little basic chemistry from my days at The University of Texas in Austin.

Can you share the most interesting story that happened to you since you began your career?

I received a call from Daria Myers, President of Origins, to come to Estee Lauder NYC offices to discuss a possible partnership. My mother was a devotee of Estee Lauder Youth Dew perfume in the classic blue bottle, it was always on her dressing table. I was excited to call her when I was waiting in Ms. Lauder's reception area surrounded by her signature pale blue decor and spectacular view of Central Park. I just had to sneak in a call to my Mom to tell her where I was. Her response? "Does it smell like Estee Lauder in there?" I loved that moment. It was a flash of insight into how a successful beauty brand can permeate one's personal ethos. I logged that moment as one of the immersive experiences that informed my path during those early years of branding Farmaesthetics.

Are you able to identify a "tipping point" in your career when you started to see success?

Before bringing Farmaesthetics into all US Origins stores, each of our products was rigorously tested to Estee Lauder's high regulatory standards for efficacy, safety, shelf life and packaging compatibility, and we passed with flying colors. That was no small feat for a 100% natural brand in 2005, and it is still no small feat all these years later.

None of us are able to achieve success without some help along the way. Is there a particular person to whom you are grateful who helped get you to where you are? Can you share a story about that?

Martha Stewart. She sought me out, believed in what I was doing and opened her door. Her generosity in providing opportunities to Farmaesthetics included sending her team to our facility in Newport, RI to shoot an eight-page photo spread for her magazine and create the video that we still use on our website. I was also a guest on The Martha Stewart Show twice and I will never forget the first time I was on her TV show. I had an alert programmed on my phone to ping each time we had an e-sale on our website. As I walked off the set into the dressing room, I could hear that ping going off and it didn't stop for two days! We felt the full impact of the Martha Stewart magic and we are still so grateful.

The global beauty industry today has grown to more than a half a trillion-dollar business. Can you tell us about the innovations that you are bringing to the industry?

I have scaled the classic craft of recipe-based, small batch herbal formulation into modern cosmetic manufacturing, without changing the ingredients, or using artificial, synthetics or nature identicals.

Can you share 3 things that most excite you about the modern beauty industry?

1. Natural ingredient supply chains have really grown in the past five years and are now readily available at volumes that were unheard of 20 years ago.
2. Independent natural beauty brands have moved well beyond the niche category and into mainstream beauty, often sitting beside big pharmaceutically driven brands with equal weight. It is no longer natural vs chemical products or brands, it is both.
3. Sustainability is now becoming criteria for purchasing beauty products. This effects the decision making and environmental impact of big corporations in a positive way and that really excites me.

Can you share what concerns you about the industry?

1. Marketing spin over truth. Positioning a brand as something it is not gives people a false experience. For example, some people say they are allergic to lavender, which gives them a headache, when they are actually allergic to lavender fragrance oil, a petroleum product with no lavender content. Farmaesthetics uses lavender in its essential oil and whole herb form, delivering a true lavender experience with all of its benefits and rarely an allergic reaction.
2. Growth of private certification bodies. Stamps of approval that are based on unknown or hazy criteria that certifies a brand as nontoxic, clean, natural, you name

it. I can only imagine how confusing it is for customers who just want to know the truth behind the products they choose to use in their personal care regimens.

If you had the ability to implement 3 ways to improve the industry, what would you suggest?

I think the industry is heading in the absolute right direction, but I would say:

1. More funding available to promote independent brands.
2. More collaborations between like-minded companies and brands of all sizes.
3. Less fear marketing about what toxic ingredients are NOT in a product and more discussion on what IS.

You are an expert about beauty. Can you share a few ideas that anyone can use “to feel beautiful”?

Slow it down. One thing I do from time to time is pretend that the power has gone off in my home. Choose an evening and shut off all the lights, phones, appliance noises etc. Light candles or oil lamps and spend time with your skincare/personal care routine- without the service of lights or mirrors. Take a basin of warm water and a cotton cloth or sponge and cleanse body tip to toe in the glow of the candlelight or fireplace if you have one. I have a large enamel basin that I keep for bathing the body and a smaller one for cleansing the face. Gently cleanse then apply your favorite moisturizing lotion or oils to face and body. Be sure to keep the products natural and free of

artificial scents. Apply moisture with extra care and, in general, take your time. Get a feel for the shape of your face and body. This kind of slow beauty routine heightens your senses, so wrap yourself in something soft and take time to acknowledge your own unique beauty.

Based on your experience and success, can you please share “Five Things You Need to Know To Succeed In The Modern Beauty Industry?”

1. Be trustworthy and accountable. This way you build lasting relationships with vendors, suppliers, customers. I am proud to say that most of our relationships from labs to farmers have been in place for 20 years. Having a healthy history with colleagues can sure come in handy in a pinch.
2. Run your own race. No one knows your brand like you do, so listen and take advice but always run it through your own truth filter.
3. Be unwavering in your standards and ethics; back in 2000, when I was first moving my product formulations into the world of cosmetic manufacturing, it was suggested to me that I use artificial fragrance oils vs real essential oils because “they are cheaper and no one really cares anyway.”
4. Stay nimble and open to change. When COVID hit, we closed our flagship store and spas, as did most of our brick-and-mortar wholesale accounts and resort hotels. We took a deep breath, but never missed a beat, going full tilt into a new ecomm strategy by building a brand-new website, expanding our team to include an ecomm strategist, art director and social media coordinator. And although it felt risky, within a few months we had a new business model that we love! As they say, good can blow in on an ill wind, and that was true for us.
5. Support your colleagues. Embrace their victories as well as your own. Some say that beauty is a jealous industry, but I think it is filled with talent and inspiration, so get in there and enjoy the ride.

If you could inspire a movement that would bring the most amount of good to the most amount of people, what would that be?

Valuing quality over quantity in products, business models and company cultures. This is the way to build a bridge to a more elegant, sustainable future where perceived value is delivered and enjoyed in full measure.

Can you please give us your favorite “Life Lesson” quote? Can you share how that was relevant to you in your life?

“Build your business around your life, not your life around your business.”

I started Farmaesthetics when my daughter was six years old; teaching her the values inherent in rural farming communities and showing her that products don't grow on shelves was the impetus for the farm stand summer project. Being involved and present for her everyday was a commitment I made to both of us. As my business took off, I struggled to find work/life balance, as a young mother and start up entrepreneur. Then one day it dawned on me: Yes, I can have it all, just not all at the same time. Twenty years later I am still reminding myself of that daily.

Thank you so much for joining us. This was very inspirational, and we wish you continued success in your important work.