

“I began to realise that there was far more depth to the Aboriginal culture than I ever imagined”



(below) Gayle Heron, the inspired founder of the Li'Tya brand; (right) Pure Being essential oil, \$20; Pregnancy Oil Blend, \$46; Lemon Myrtle & Desert Salt Body Polish, \$26.



Hey Li'Tya girl

COMBINING THE TRADITIONS OF ABORIGINAL ELDERS AND MODERN MARKETING, THIS UNIQUELY AUSSIE BRAND IS BEAUTY AT ITS BEST.

STORY JANE HUTCHINSON

Smoke curls up from the wooden cradle of smouldering twigs and moss, its pungent scent mingling in the air with the piped strains of didgeridoo. My thoughts drift to ancient campfire ceremonies and Dreamtime landscapes, until the soothing sweep of the therapist's hands nudge me back to the here and now. I'm in a luxury spa in downtown St Kilda.

But this is no ordinary spa treatment. It's a Li'Tya Ocean Dreaming package; that's three indulgent hours of pampering and stroking, rubbing and wrapping, using products and techniques drawn from the ancient wisdom of indigenous Australians. It begins with a traditional smoking ceremony, the ritual burning of native O'yarrornng moss and lemon myrtle, and progresses through an indulgent series of scrubs, wraps, massage and facial treatments, using native oils spiked with exotic scents. It's pampering at its most decadent, but it's also pampering with a message: the world's oldest surviving culture, one so often ignored or derided by white Australia, has much to teach.

A few days after my experience, I meet the face behind the message, Gayle Heron, a blonde-haired mother of four from the Mornington Peninsula. She tells me that the idea of a product range based on indigenous lore came to her out of the blue in the mid-'80s. "I'd always had a fascination with herbs and holistic healing," says the youthful looking 50-year-old. "But then it struck me that all the things we were using were European, Asian or Eastern. I thought, what about our own backyard? We have skincare companies, such as Jurlique and Red Earth, that tap into the European

plants, but no one's doing the Australian thing."

At the time, she was raising her two eldest children on her own and teaching photography at RMIT. But, fired by what seemed such an obvious gap in the market, she approached her father, an industrial chemist, to help bring her idea to life. "He said, 'Well, you find out about the plants and I'll teach you about formulating the products.'"

So began Heron's 10-year research odyssey, snatching lunchtimes and spare moments reading everything she could on Australian native plants and bush foods. The thing that surprised her most during those years was that nobody else beat her to the idea.

Finally in 1997, she was ready to launch her first range of products into lifestyle shops around the country. But first she needed a name – something authentic, evocative of the products' origins. She contacted the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, which referred her to an artist and respected elder of the Pangerang people of north-eastern Victoria. "I rang him and said, 'I have this range of products coming out and, out of respect for the Aboriginal people, I'd really like it if you could give me a name for it.'" The elder, who has since passed away, not only suggested the name Baiame, which is a creator spirit for some East Coast tribes, he began teaching Heron about the spiritual side of his culture.

She was an eager student and, as the fledgling Baiame stuttered to life, Heron set out to learn as much as she could about the 40,000-year-old culture of indigenous Australia. "I started travelling and meeting Aboriginal people and began to learn about

their healing and philosophy," says Heron. "And I began to realise there was far more depth to the culture than I ever imagined."

Her quest led her to an anthropologist who had worked in both Australia's Western Desert and Japan. He told her he had seen indigenous people practising healing techniques that were remarkably similar to Eastern practices. Heron was intrigued. "I started asking all the Aboriginal people I knew, 'Do you do massage?' They all came back with a blank 'no'. So then I thought, OK, change the question: 'Do you do touch for healing?' And they'd say, 'Oh yeah.'"

The more she learnt, the more it dawned on Heron that merely marketing lotions and potions based on indigenous ingredients was selling short an incredibly rich and complex culture. "I just thought there's all this knowledge, and the best way to present it would be with a spa range, incorporating the treatment and the product and the philosophy together."

The turning point came when Heron met Kakkib li' Dthia Warrawee'a, a spiritual advisor and doctor from Victoria's Ya'itd-mitung people. He told her of a healing tradition, called Yabang, which had never previously been shared with white people and, remarkably, he agreed to teach her the techniques. "He didn't want to die with the knowledge and he said he felt that white people had evolved enough to be able to accept it with the grace and the respect that it deserved," recalls Heron. "He told me he'd been waiting to find the right moment and person."

He became Heron's mentor, teaching her about his traditional culture and Yabang. She explains that like many Eastern healing practices, the ancient technique concentrates on energy flow within the body. "The treatment is done in a circular motion. To do it properly, you never remove your hand from the person's body because you're moving the energy around in a circle. It's about working on pressure points to clear energy blocks."

Kakkib li' Dthia's teachings formed the cornerstone of Heron's new company, Li'Tya (meaning 'of the earth'), which launched in 2000 in the prestigious Mandarin Oriental Hotel in Macau. Heron explains the company offers a melding of ancient traditions with five-star spa treatment. So while every treatment begins with the smoking ceremony and all products are based on indigenous plants – lemon myrtle (antiseptic and high in vitamin C), rosella (hydrating and high in protein) and lillypilly (astringent but non-drying) – the traditional massage is no longer enjoyed lying naked on the ground, performed by a naked practitioner. "I had a fair bit of negotiation to do with Kakkib li' Dthia on this issue," admits Heron.

Clearly, Li'Tya was an idea whose time had come – the chichi Aurora day spa in St Kilda and the Daintree Eco-lodge signed up in quick succession and seven years on, Li'Tya has a presence in 60 spas in 10 countries. These days, another Ya'itd-mitung elder and medicine woman, Anne Warren, travels the world teaching Li'Tya therapists about the healing techniques passed down by her ancestors. And, says Heron, it's just the beginning. "I believe we have something so credible that we can be in all the top spas around the world." Last year, Li'Tya opened its

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first licensed concept spa in St Kilda and three more are in the pipeline. A further five are in negotiation.

Inevitably, there have been sceptics – both black and white – who've accused Heron, a middle-class white woman, of exploiting indigenous culture for profit. But while she concedes it's the ancient indigenous ingredients and techniques that give Li'Tya its wow factor, she stresses there's far more to it than clever marketing. She says the company adheres to the traditional philosophies of the Ya'itd-mitung people in all it does – especially the notion that every thing and every person is linked as part of one creative force. In practice, this means the company strives to tread as lightly on the earth as possible. Heron explains that all Li'Tya treatments and products are 98.5 per cent natural and sensibly packaged. Wherever possible, the company uses organic ingredients and it sources most of its native plants from Australian Indigenous Foods, a co-op that buys from Aboriginal communities throughout Australia. "We pay more for our native plants through them," says Heron, "but we're committed to returning something to indigenous communities."

To this end, Heron has also established the Li'Tya Foundation, which channels a percentage of profits (and direct donations) to projects involved in bolstering Aboriginal culture and education. Managed by Heron's eldest daughter, Aphra, the foundation supports such things as cultural workshops designed to connect Aboriginal people to their heritage. It's also developing a partnership with the non-profit Indigenous Community Volunteers organisation to help communities develop skills in areas such as healthcare and hairdressing.

Since last year, Li'Tya traditional healing techniques have been taught as part of the Resort Management course at Melbourne's William Angliss Institute of TAFE. Heron hopes to expand to other colleges around the country, with a percentage of places set aside for indigenous youth. "I really want to get proactive about educating indigenous youth so they can pursue jobs and careers. And this helps them tap into their culture."

The more Heron talks, the more you realise she's selling more than body lotions and massages. "I don't want to just be selling a tube of cream," she says. "I think that's frivolous in some ways. I don't think I could have so much passion for the business if there weren't that deeper aim behind it. And, really, our core mission is to do something to help. If I can influence just one person to change the way they think about Aboriginal people or do one tiny little thing to improve someone's life, then that's important."

And she believes it's much easier to change someone's mind with a message than with a megaphone. "I don't want to be on a soapbox; I don't want to be political. And what we're doing doesn't impose on people to change; it doesn't call on any one of us to do anything other than be nurtured."

I must admit, lying limp and blissfully relaxed on the bed, the delicious scent of wild rosella wafting overhead, reconciliation never felt so good. **SM**

For more information on Li'Tya, visit www.litya.com.

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