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The Latest Wrinkle

WASHINGTON

I dimly recall a time when women talked about books, plays and politics. Now all we talk about is skin.

In the old days, there were two ways to curate your skin: Noxzema or Pond's. Now there are ways beyond number to mortify aging flesh: cutaneous laser resurfacing, ultrasound liposuction, acid and chemical peels, \$80 one-ounce vials of Cellex-C High Potency Serum (less imposingly known as vitamin C).

We are hydrating the dickens out of ourselves. Molting like snakes. Pumping in fillers — our own fat, cow collagen, autologous collagen grown from our own cells — so we can erase our faces and start over.

Idolized by boomers determined not to age, dermatologists are the demiurges of the 90's. Tons of fat move daily in a great circular, cannibalizing glob, a gelatinous Narcissus pool, suctioned out, injected in.

I went to talk to the two reigning deities of dermatology: New York's Patti Wexler, a.k.a. the Queen of Fat, and Washington's Tina Alster, a.k.a. the Laser Queen.

Dr. Wexler, a cult figure among Hollywood stars and high-powered New Yorkers, showed me the small freezers in which she stores vials of celebrity fat, alphabetically. It is extracted out of hips and buttocks so it can be reinjected into facial lines, depressions and lips. "The ultimate recycling," she calls it. (Here's a concept for a zany comedy: Somebody sneaks into the Fat Queen's freezer and switches the labels!)

The freezers have an alarm system to make sure the temperature does not rise above minus-8 degrees centigrade, making the fat flat. "Do you think if 100 women lost their fat, I'm going to survive?" asks Dr. Wexler, an impish redhead with cat glasses.

For her best friend's 40th birthday, Dr. Wexler liposuctioned out two liters, shrinking the woman from a size 10 to a 6. The friend kept calling from boutiques to say how great she looked in everything. (I wonder if Dr. Wexler is called on to rush to Madison Avenue in emergencies, to help patients squeeze into that Alaia size 4?) But when the friend wanted collagen shots, Dr. Wexler balked. "I was deaf, like Thomas Edison. I said, 'When I catch up, we'll do you again.' I'd like to be a size 2. I get angry, frustrated."

She says the field has exploded because of women on the run. "They say, 'Tonight I'm going to a party with Anna Wintour, tomorrow I'm seeing Liza, what can we do today?'"

She warns women who've lost perspective. "A squint has no social value. But some things you live with, whether you need Prozac or not."

The latest is a Gore-Tex-like hollow tube implanted for better poutiness. "Water-repellent lips," she jokes.

Her pal, Dr. Alster, the author of "Cosmetic Laser Surgery," is a glamorous blonde in Chanel whose motto is "Natural, shmatatural."

"In D.C., everybody wants to be a natural beauty," she says. "People always ask me, 'Have you had anything done?' I say, 'Of course I have! Who do you think we try out these lasers on?' I've had peels. I've had the bikini hair-removal laser."

On this day, the 37-year-old has just had an injection of Botox. The toxin that causes botulism also relaxes the muscles that cause a frown. But you mustn't let the toxin drip down, where it could immobilize your eyeballs. "You just can't bend over to try on shoes for a few hours," Dr. Alster says, sitting up straight.

She guards against overkill — women "wanting Daffy Duck lips," she says, or fixating on earlobe wrinkles. "Some people have hideously wrinkled faces and they're worried about these creases in their earlobes because God forbid their diamonds should be next to their wrinkles." (Or, God forbid, the diamond should drop into a wrinkle.) "You can't get so caught up in this stuff that you get sucked down the drain."

We seem to be heading toward a standardization of beauty. But if women all look sanded down, men may gravitate toward the quirky. Then the chicks with the love handles will be the lucky ones. □