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Emu Oil Poised to Become Personal-Care Option

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Bucking the current trend toward botanicals in personal-care products is emu oil, which is derived from the fat of the emu, a flightless bird in the ostrich family. The emu is native to Australia, but it is being grown throughout the US, mostly for its flesh, which is perceived as a healthier alternative to red meat. The refined oil of the emu is touted as having a number of unique properties for skincare and other applications. Participants in the emu industry expect their products to become more popular as the oil becomes better known.

Aborigines have used emu oil for centuries. Manufacturers offer it as an anti-inflammatory and an emollient, as well as a way to combat aging and promote healing by thickening the skin. The product also acts as a natural and inexpensive liposome by delivering other ingredients as it readily penetrates the skin's outer layer. A number of laboratory tests bear out some of these claims.

"The reason that emu oil serves as a carrier or as a natural emollient is because it is phospho-lipid free," says Jean Summerour, vice-president of the American Emu Association (AEA), a trade organization of 1,700 growers and others who have stakes in emu products. "Your skin has no phosphorus, so any product that has phospho-lipids, including anything that is petroleum-based, can't penetrate the skin. Emu oil is very close in composition to the essential fatty acids that are already in the skin, so the skin absorbs it."

Ms. Summerour says the industry is too new to measure in terms of how much of the oil is manufactured or sold. It typically wholesales for \$200 to \$220 per gallon. Her organization is just beginning to track the oil's market and should have preliminary figures in about six months. She says that roughly 50 companies sell emu oil products in the US for skincare, hair care and animal care. "We are beginning to see some major product movement. It's tough to compete, but we have a phenomenal product that in many ways is so good, it comes across as snake oil," she adds.

Planet Emu Inc. markets high-end products. Two years ago, its Dremu line was sold by direct mail, mostly to skin doctors and sufferers of dry skin and arthritis. The line is now sold in 91 department stores throughout the country, thanks mostly to the marketing savvy of company president Julie Brumlik. Ms. Brumlik says the emu oil in her products is

triple-refined through a proprietary process she developed using microfilters. She is critical of the quality of some of the oil on the market and says that many current products are being formulated and sold by ranchers who are not knowledgeable about chemistry or marketing. "The market for emu oil is growing slowly as people try it," she says. "One of the drawbacks was that farmers were making their own products. They knew they had a rich oil but were not qualified by any kind of training to make cosmetic products. They would go to a private label lab and just pour some emu oil on top of some other cream or lotion. But they just can't get into stores because they don't have a product that will stand up to scrutiny."

AEA's Ms. Summerour admits there have been problems with inferior raw materials and products, but she says her organization has taken steps to institute standards. "Refining is absolutely the key, because it has to be refined at a level that removes the proteins and any microbes. On the other hand, you have to be careful that in the refining process you're not destroying the oil's natural properties."

Ann Olsson, owner of Emu Marketing International, is a rancher who sells the oil in bulk, as well as in private-label products and two products she markets directly: Renaissance by Alexandar, a beauty cream, and Allflex, a sports and healthcare cream. Ms. Olsson sees potential growth in international markets. "I've done mostly international marketing, rather than stateside," she says. "The US does not like to use animal products. They're going more botanical. Internationally, people don't care. Look at all the furs they wear in Russia." The main competition for US emu oil is Australian emu oil. Ms. Olsson says that when the birds were first bred in the US, some oil sellers were importing Australian material because the birds were too valuable to process. Ms. Olsson says that Australian oil being imported at that time may have been inferior because of lower refining standards, but Australian oil has probably caught up in quality to US oils.

One company selling Australian oil in the US is Tower Enterprises Inc., which sells bulk oil under the trade name Kalaya, the aboriginal name for emu oil. Sources agree that Kalaya is a high-quality oil—one notable customer is Donna Karan. Tower's sister company, New World Technologies Inc., markets downstream products, 0.5 and 1 ounce jars of the oil, and cleansing bars. During the next year or two, the company plans to add six or seven products to its line, including skin creams, a shaving cream and a gel, says Chris Davidson, New World's sales director.

In addition to its personal-care uses, emu oil has pharmaceutical and medicinal applications. Not only is the oil said to help burns and wounds heal, it can aid in the topical application of certain drugs. "[Lidocaine] is a more effective topical anesthesia because of mixture with emu oil. By itself, lidocaine is not topically effective, except in your mouth or on mucous membranes," says Ms. Brumlik, who own a pharmaceutical patent for the oil. According to Ms. Brumlik, emu oil is generally recognized as safe by Food and Drug Administration. It is edible, non-toxic and not an ocular irritant. She says the industry has the science to back up the product's benefits. "We make claims because we can prove them. We have the clinicals."