

The Luberon

Too good to be true?

Robert Boucheron

The new health club is a sleek industrial loft fitted with exposed ducts, brilliant dome lights, spotless carpet, and rows of machines that suggest a factory, an ultra-clean assembly plant. What high-tech product is made here?

“In order to appeal to the non-exerciser, we had to reevaluate our services, facilities, and programming,” says club owner Phil Wendel. “We wanted to get away from the gym stereotype and reach out beyond the iron-pumping, string bikini crowd.”

Accordingly, the club appeals to the over-fifty set, gray-haired retirees, arthritis and chronic pain sufferers, and people with hip and knee replacements. Licensed physical therapists are on staff, and the club is accessible to the handicapped. I fit this demographic. I am ambulatory, not on regular medication, just trying to hold it together.

“Start with thirty minutes on the elliptical trainer,” says Daphne, the fitness consultant. “That’s your low-impact cardiovascular workout. Lots of heavy breathing, heart pumping, and sweat. Then move on to resistance training. Or free weights, if you know how to handle them. If not, grab one of us for instruction, or ask another club member. Work on all the muscle groups. We’re going for whole-body health, not beefcake cosmetics, right?”

“Right.” I stand beside a machine with two large vertical levers, oversize pedals, and a little box that displays electronic numbers. “Why is it called elliptical?”

“Good question. I’ll have to research that and get back to you.”

Precor is the trade name blazoned on the machine. The manufacturer likely had something else in mind, but the word *precor* in Latin means “I pray, beg or entreat.” It occurs in the *Odes* of Horace, Book 4, number 1, *Intermissa Venus diu*, in the second line:

Wars, Venus, long since done
will you incite again? Spare me, I pray.

I am no more the one
I was under the good Cinara's sway.

Mother of love and tears,
stay the almighty hand that seeks to bend
my brittle fifty years.
Go where the tempting prayers of youth ascend.

Gingerly, I mount the machine by placing my sneakers on the pedals. When I start to walk in place, the levers swing back and forth. I fumble until I find the pace, a rolling gait that engages arms and legs. Better than a treadmill, the machine carries me along for a while. But thirty minutes of this?

A row of silent television screens mounted high on the wall faces the row of elliptical trainers. The televisions are tuned to different stations and programs—a parade of old Hollywood movies, advertisements, news, and sports. By craning my neck, my eyes flit from screen to screen. I watch slack-jawed and pant from exertion. The lack of sound makes a game of it, to guess what the talking heads are saying. Other club members listen through earbuds, or they ignore the screens in favor of a book or magazine.

I become a regular at the health club. I do not lose weight or build muscle, but I enjoy a sense of well-being, a cardiovascular boost. Still, the elliptical trainer is tedious. I pedal and pedal and slip into a trance. Television programming is light on weekends. A long infomercial describes a miraculous skin care product. Subtitles and testimonials flash by, and close-ups of Cindy Crawford, the supermodel with the mole on her upper lip. The story draws me in. It features a skinny French doctor, an excited skin care customer, and a melon that resists decay. It is grown in a place called the Luberon.

What or where is the Luberon? Is it legendary, like the Land of Cockaigne or Shangri-La? Is it real but remote, like Timbuktu or

Patagonia? Is it a private preserve, a natural paradise, an agricultural experiment?

Meaningful Beauty is the name of the skin care product, a line of anti-aging creams, lotions, capsules, and serum, all of which contain the “super anti-oxidant SOD, extracted from a rare variety of French melon.” Dr. Jean-Louis Sebagh, a specialist located in Paris, discovered the secret of this melon. As a disinterested scientist, he decided to share this secret with the world. Cindy Crawford, one of Dr. Sebagh’s medical patients, agreed to help. For a surprisingly low price, you can buy and use Meaningful Beauty products, arrest and repair the ravages of age in your own face, and become as lovely as Cindy Crawford.

Meaningful Beauty is one of eight product lines sold by Guthy-Renker, a company based in Santa Monica, California. Created by Bill Guthy and Greg Renker, the company sells products to consumers through infomercials, television ads, direct mail, telemarketing, e-mail marketing, and the internet, with an emphasis on celebrity-endorsed beauty products, according to Pamela Danziger in her 2005 book *Let Them Eat Cake*. The celebrities include Victoria Principal, Leeza Gibbons, Heidi Klum, Susan Lucci, Jessica Simpson, Brooke Shields—and Cindy Crawford. The products include exercise equipment, cosmetics, hair care, and acne treatment.

Guthy-Renker probably invented Meaningful Beauty. Someone saw the flesh of the melon as a potent metaphor, roped Cindy Crawford and Dr. Jean-Louis Sebagh into the project, and wrote the story that ties them all together. As a man, I am not the target audience, but the infomercial touches me. Who does not wish to remain fresh and firm? Instead, we all grow stale and withered. Our skin wrinkles and droops. It becomes as thin as tissue paper, while the muscle underneath shrinks or turns to flab. Hair loses color and luster, or it slips away in the night. All flesh is grass, according to the prophet Isaiah.

At the same time, who can believe this fairy tale? The sales pitch is as obvious as snake oil or the elixir of love. Yet the infomercial spins on and on. It repeats the footage it showed minutes ago: Dr. Sebagh in his clinic, the pink faces of mature Caucasian women, the melon that never shrivels. Above all, the infomercial dwells on Cindy Crawford.

As she picks up the phone to tell a woman who uses Meaningful Beauty that she, yes she, has been chosen to spend a day in New York City, shopping and hanging out, Cindy Crawford is bored. Stripped of her soundtrack, the star shows she would rather be elsewhere. Has the glamorous life of a supermodel left her jaded? Has she grown indifferent to fame and fortune? The camera adores her, but she disdains the camera.

Cindy Crawford was born in 1966 in DeKalb, Illinois. She is five feet nine inches tall, with brown hair and eyes. She graduated from DeKalb High School in 1984, and she worked full-time in modeling from 1985 to 2000. In 1995, *Forbes* magazine declared her the highest paid model on the planet. She is one of the original five supermodels, featured on magazine covers worldwide. She was named one of the 100 Hottest Women of All-Time by *Men's Health*. Photos of her at age 28 and age 48 prove she is still beautiful.

The mole, which in the early years was airbrushed out of the photos, is also still there. Surely, with her wealth, access to plastic surgery, and professional image to uphold, she could have removed it. Keeping it was a stroke of genius. In eighteenth century Europe, courtesans and ladies of fashion applied an artificial blot—called a *mouche* in French, meaning a “fly,” and called a “patch” in English—to highlight the smoothness and whiteness of the face. Here the effect is reversed. Without this one imperfection, Cindy Crawford would be a goddess, unavailable. With it, she is human. She breaks the mold in other ways, too. Instead of being thin and blonde, she is curvaceous and brunette.

That face, however, has had work done. Cindy Crawford told Helen Kirwan-Taylor, for an article in the London *Evening Standard* in 2010: “I’m not going to lie to myself. Past a certain age, in order to restore elasticity, all I can count on is vitamin injections, Botox, and collagen.”

The infomercial omits this point. It implies that Cindy Crawford’s use of Meaningful Beauty products has prolonged her youth. If customers wish to mislead others about their age, do they deserve to be misled?

Dr. Jean-Louis Sebagh is the subject of that 2010 article by Helen Kirwan-Taylor. She calls him “the rejuvenator.” Born about 1955 in Algeria, Sebagh grew up in Paris, the son of a “tough businesswoman” and a man who ran a supermarket chain called Fanprix. Sebagh graduated from the University of Paris in 1979 as a doctor of medicine. From 1985 to 1988, he learned plastic surgery in Los Angeles. For some years, he was on staff at the Hôpital Foch in Paris, where he worked to rebuild cancer victims’ faces and heal burn victims’ scarring. About 1994, he began to travel to London to serve a wealthy female clientele with skin injections. He now runs clinics in London and Paris. Kirwan-Taylor says:

For all the hype, and there is plenty, Dr. Sebagh talks a straight game. He claims he doesn’t change faces but “restores what you lost five to ten years ago. I am like a painter. There are artistic skills. Some people are talented, some are not. You don’t learn how to do any of this in school.”

Plastic surgery, celebrities, the skin care industry, airbrushed photos in glossy magazines—this is a world in which truth and falsehood entwine. The Luberon, however, is a real place. It is located in the south of France, in the region of Provence, in the department of Vaucluse. The Luberon is geologically and biologically rich. It has long been a favorite vacation spot for the French, like the *Côte d’Azur* just

to the south, the Mediterranean seacoast we call the Riviera. Provence in general is scenic, historic, and gastronomic, a magnet in summer for international tourists. And the heart of Provence is the Luberon.

A broken ridge or mountain range runs generally east and west. Starting from the west, or left on the map, the range is called the *Petit Luberon*, the *Grand Luberon*, and the *Luberon Oriental*. The valleys that lie north and south of this range are filled with farms and about one hundred villages, some of them old and picturesque. Much of the area is in the *Parc naturel régional du Luberon*, an official designation that operates like a state or national park in the United States. Development is limited, flora and fauna are protected, and traditional agriculture is encouraged.

Among the cultural riches of Provence, the city of Avignon is just west of the Luberon, on the Rhône River. From 1309 to 1377, the popes lived in Avignon, not Rome. The presence of the papal court gave the city a prestige that lingers. The Papal Palace is a major tourist attraction today. So are the cities of Arles, Orange and Nîmes, with their Roman monuments, the natural slopes of Mont Ventoux, and more.

Still, the Luberon retains a legendary air, an aroma of fantasy. Like Tuscany, the Scottish Highlands, and the Vale of Kashmir, it is both a place one can visit and a land of desire. Age informs me in a querulous voice there are things I will never do and places I will never see. The Luberon may be one of them.

Cavaillon is a town in the Luberon toward the west, and Cavaillon is famous for melons. Legend says that they arrived with the pope from his summer residence at Cantalupo, near Perugia, Italy, another town famous for melons. In France, some melons are called *cavaillon* from the town, and some are called *charentais*. From the website Specialty Produce:

The charentais is a petite-sized melon with a smooth, hard, pistachio-grey colored skin and distinct green ribbing. Its flesh is deep orange, dense, smooth and sweet, similar to that of a cantaloupe. When ripe it is highly fragrant with tropical fruit and floral notes. Its delicious flavor and powerful aroma must be appreciated at its height of maturity, as it has a delicate and short shelf-life.

Evidently, this is not the melon shown in the infomercial, the one that keeps forever. The Healthy Living Blog of February 16, 2012 says:

Most distinctively, the cavaillon is a long-lasting melon . . . The melon is particularly rich in the provitamin A (beta-carotene) with all the great antioxidant properties that go along with it. The melons are also a great source of vitamin C necessary in the production of collagen and healing.

They also contain minerals. The nutrients are common to melons, and they are absorbed by eating, not by smearing on the skin. The same blog entry extols Dr. Jean-Louis Sebagh and Meaningful Beauty products. No author is stated. The blog seems to be produced by Max International Distribution Company, in which Bill Guthy and Greg Renker are investors. A disclaimer says: “Aside from guest posts, the content written by Healthy Living Blogs is not written by a medical or fitness professional.”

Provence has a literary past that dates to the Middle Ages, when *Provençal* was the language of the troubadours. Writers from the Marquis de Sade to Albert Camus have lived in Provence. The most famous, at least in France, is Alphonse Daudet, who was born in Nîmes in 1840 and went to Paris to seek his fortune. On visits home, the young Daudet wrote sketches on local life and sent them to Parisian newspapers. He then collected the sketches as a book called *Letters from My Windmill*, published in 1860.

Daudet weaves together fact and fiction, humor and pathos. He draws lively characters like the poet Mistral, and he reworks folktales like “The Pope’s Mule.” The book had a slow start, but it became a classic. The windmill where Daudet stayed but never actually lived is now a literary landmark. Daudet started a genre that might be called travel lit lite, a genre continued by writers such as Bruce Chatwin and Paul Theroux. Late in the twentieth century, Daudet’s brand and Provence itself got an update.

Peter Mayle was born in 1939 in Brighton, England. He worked in advertising in London and New York, was very successful, and quit the business in 1974. He then devoted himself to writing books on sex education, dogs, and self-help for children. In the early 1980s, he and his wife discovered Provence, and in 1986 they moved to the village of Ménerbes to live there year-round. Mayle wrote about their experience, and he published *A Year in Provence* in 1989.

Mayle sets the scene in the first pages: “It was a *mas*, or farmhouse, built of local stone which two hundred years of wind and sun had weathered to a color somewhere between pale honey and pale gray.” The property had six acres, mostly planted with vines, which a tenant farmer tended. Best of all:

it sat within the boundaries of a national park, sacred to the French heritage and out of bounds to concrete mixers.

The Luberon Mountains rise up immediately behind the house.... Cedars and pines and scrub oak keep them perpetually green and provide cover for boar, rabbits, and game birds. Wild flowers, thyme, lavender, and mushrooms grow between rocks and under the trees.... It is a 247,000-acre extension of the back garden.

The book rambles through daily life, with trips to the market, the purchase of a car, summer house guests, and two campaigns of home improvement. Mayle sketches his peasant neighbors—Antoine Massot, Faustin and Henriette, the plumber Menicucci, and a host of others. He reports anecdotes first-hand and amusing stories he

has heard. Weather figures largely, as it does in the country, with extremes of hot and cold, including a heavy snowfall. Food and wine are described in detail and consumed in quantity. Children and relatives are notably absent. Did the Mayles have none, or would family impinge on the lifestyle narrative?

Though it follows the calendar, with a chapter titled for each month of the year, the book probably combines events of two or three years. Its tone implies a certain license, a degree of exaggeration. Book reviews called it “delightful,” “delicious,” “engaging,” and “witty.” They may have been responding to Mayle’s facetious style, since the events he relates are ordinary enough. He is adept at dialogue and lavish with color. The whole book reads like advertising copy. It was, of course, a huge success.

Mayle followed it up with more memoirs, novels, mysteries, and tour guides, all about Provence. The mix of fact and fiction suggests a casual attitude, as though the author did not greatly care which is which. Complaining of fans and sightseers, Mayle sold his piece of paradise, moved to the Hamptons, then returned to the Luberon, where he lives today and continues to write books.

In 1989, when he is fifty, the age Horace considered “brittle,” even Mayle alludes to a decline in strength and stamina. He and his wife buy bicycles and go for a spin on May first, a sunny morning. “I could feel the muscles in my thighs complaining as the gradient became steeper, and my unseasoned backside was aching. By the time we reached the village it hurt to breathe.”

An aging body alters a person in ways no anti-oxidant can restore. In early retirement in the fabled Luberon, Mayle may have stumbled on this truth. Now that he is seventy-seven, it must have sunk in. If it all sounds too good to be true, then maybe it is.