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Tales of the Orient

THE MANDARIN ORIENTAL HOTEL GROUP HAS LAUNCHED A TREATMENT AND PRODUCT CONCEPT ACROSS THE GLOBE. WE FIND OUT MORE



This month, the Mandarin Oriental Hotel Group (MOHG) will roll out its own-branded treatments and products worldwide. From 1 June, 11 MOHG spas – stretching from Tokyo to London and Miami – will be ready to win over guests in these times of economic gloom with a series of innovative new offerings. The seven other spas in the portfolio will follow suit once licensing approval is granted.

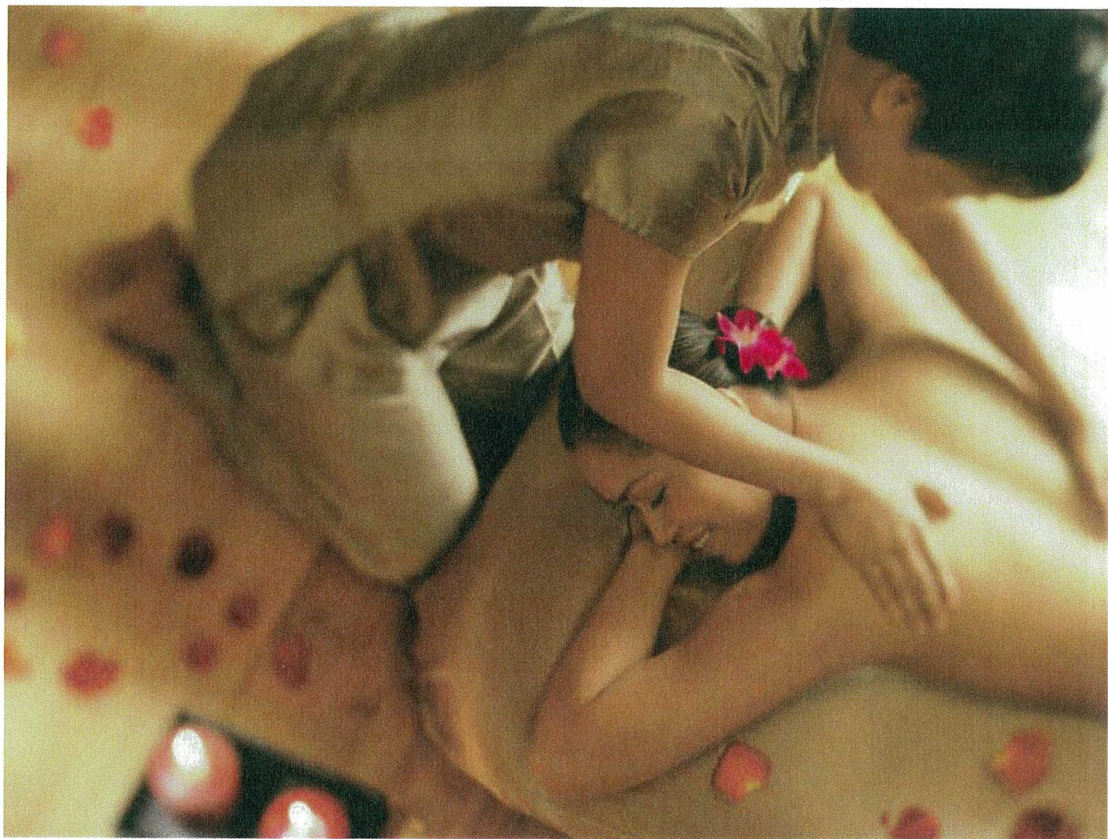
This isn't just another private-label launch however, this is a new spa therapy concept: a hybrid of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) and aromatherapy. Neither is this something introduced on a whim to win over customers in the credit crunch: it's something the group has been working on for more than four years and has invested hundreds of thousands pounds in.

ORIENTAL HERITAGE

While it's good practice to keep treatment offerings fresh and interesting, an investment of this amount is not something any company makes lightly. This is serious business. "Mandarin Oriental Spas are not sub-branded, like many of our competitors: the brand is Mandarin Oriental," says Andrew Gibson, MOHG's group director of spa. "We're a rapidly expanding global chain that needs a core. While each spa has a degree of individuality, such as local treatments, they need a common binder and that's what this is. It's a tangible expression of the Mandarin Oriental philosophy."

The idea to develop an own-branded product and treatment line was something that had been on the cards for around two years before Gibson joined MOHG in early 2007.

"The process began with me trying to crystallise the Mandarin Oriental philosophy," Gibson says. "We have a strong Oriental heritage, so the treatments had to have this base. There are strong elements of TCM in what we're doing, although we don't want to label ourselves as this. We also wanted our products to be natural.



[Aromatherapy] oils and scrubs are the easiest way to do this and keep authenticity.”

Then came choosing a company to make the products and here, after a tendering process, the decision was made to go with Aromatherapy Associates. Geraldine Howard, co-founder, says: “People think it’s easy to put a product line together, but it isn’t. There’s a massive business consideration. Logistically we needed to determine whether we were able to distribute the products to all the countries [that MOHG is based in]. We also needed to be sure we could meet the criteria to get the products registered, accepted and legal in all of these countries. Then it’s about production, cost-effectiveness, minimum order quantities and stockholding. We did a lot of research into numbers and it’s a massive process to work out how many products are going to be used in all of these spas around the world and this is something that people just aren’t aware of.”

It wasn’t until January 2008, however, that the real shaping of the concept occurred, when key figures from the two companies got together for a five-day brainstorming session. From MOHG was Gibson; Andrea Lomas, the head of group spa operations who has been a major driving force for the concept since its inception and has had an integral role in its development; MOHG’s regional trainers from the Americas and Asia; and an independent Chinese, holistic medical doctor, Claire Beardson. From Aromatherapy Associates was Howard; two of the company’s senior trainers; and Howard’s business partner Sue Beechey – the first time in 15 years that Beechey and Howard have collaborated on a new line of oils for spas. “It was a phenomenal team,” says Gibson.

“Everybody knows the efficacy of aromatherapy and meridian massage, which is a real Chinese massage, but trying to get them

Mandarin Oriental Spa Therapies have been devised as tailor-made treatments for each guest, based on their personal, current state of wellbeing

to work together is very complicated,” he adds. Yet with this experienced team collaborating around one table things seemed to slot into place. Howard says: “We all worked well together and learned from each other. Essential oils are complex substances, so unless you really understand them, it’s difficult to get them working effectively in TCM. All of the essential oil blends we’ve developed link to one of the five Chinese elements. And although many people think aromatherapy is just Swedish

massage with essential oils, it’s not. Aromatherapy massage (based on the Marguerite Maury technique) is based on Eastern techniques and meridian massage.”

WHEEL OF WELLNESS

The Mandarin Oriental Spa Therapies have been devised as a tailor-made treatment for each guest. The experience, which lasts for two hours, begins with a questionnaire and a physical analysis of the spine’s pressure points to determine the individual’s personal and current state of wellbeing. Based on this, the therapist gives the guest two oils to smell and choose between for their treatment – reflecting yin and yang. There are five oils altogether, each of which have been custom-blended by Aromatherapy Associates to support the problems associated with each of the five Chinese elements: wood, fire, earth, metal and water. The earth oil, for example, comprises lemon, lemongrass, coriander and cardamom oils, as these help to energise people and work particularly well on the digestive system. Both of these are troublesome areas for people who are linked to the earth element.

The 90-minute massage that follows focuses on certain meridian points over the body, depending on the answers given in the questionnaire. “There are probably about 10 different massage styles,

Treatments

As well as a signature retail line, bespoke nutritional and exercise guidance is offered to guests according to their original consultation – this has been developed in conjunction with Hong Kong-based Ross Eathorne

which are based around the meridians," says Gibson. "The therapist may start on one side of the body, or work up or down. It's very complex.

"It's been tested with our staff and management for the best part of a year, in addition, we've tested it on consumers in Hong Kong and Chinese doctors have checked it for authenticity to ensure we're hitting the right meridian points. If you are a person that understands spa treatments, then you'll recognise the complexity of what we've done. If you don't, it doesn't really matter: all you'll need to know is that you're going to get a fantastic massage."

But the concept doesn't stop at the massage. As well as a signature retail line, bespoke nutritional and exercise guidance is offered to guests according to their original consultation – this has been developed in conjunction with Hong Kong-based lifestyle coach Ross Eathorne. In the future, the group will also extend this line of thinking to teas and music for customers. "We call this our wheel of wellness: we've looked at the different components of wellness and we're building that into our concept," says Gibson. "It's this thought process that makes us unique."

BRAND VALUES

In parallel to treatment and product development, MOHG has been putting its spas through a 'treatment menu engineering exercise', based on an adapted version of the menu engineering process from Cornell's Restaurant Administration Simulation Exercise (CRASE). "We took every single treatment from our spas worldwide and analysed them on cost versus sales," says Sonee Singh, MOHG's regional director of spa – the Americas, who headed up the exercise. "The result was a grid of Stars (low cost, high sales), Plow Horses (high cost, high sales), Dogs (high cost, low sales) and Puzzles (low cost, low sales). Our aim was to maximise Stars and Plow Horses, and minimise Dogs and Puzzles, but maintain a well-balanced menu." As such, MOHG has cut its spa menus down to 25 treatments, leaving enough room for the new signature therapies to make their mark.

To further prepare for the rollout, each treatment manager from 12 spas underwent two weeks of training – headed up by Aromatherapy Associates representatives, Lomas and MOHG's regional trainers – five months before launching.

So, with everything in place, what is MOHG hoping to achieve? "The investment has been very high end," Gibson says. "If we get that back within three years that would be very good. It's more



HOME IMPROVEMENT

The Mandarin Oriental signature product line, developed in conjunction with Aromatherapy Associates, incorporates body and bath oils matched to each of the five elements, as well as a generic body scrub, body wash and body lotion and a range of candles and travel-sized products. The prices start at £10 (US\$16, €11) for the travel body wash and go up to £31 (US\$49, €35) for a pack of five body oils.

All the products use natural ingredients and are devoid of chemicals such as SLES and parabens (see SB06/1 p22 for more details about the use of chemical ingredients in skincare). All the packaging is eco-friendly. "This is something both of us feel strongly about," says Aromatherapy Associates' Geraldine Howard. Mandarin Oriental's Andrew Gibson adds: "The challenge is to deliver on luxury, but to also have respect for the environment. That's something personal to me, but I also think that if you're a public business today and you're not taking care of that, you're losing an advantage."

than worth it though because this is giving us a foundation to really take the [Mandarin Oriental Spa] philosophy and expand it.

"But the real upside is the brand value. We've now got a tangible core to our wellness philosophy and you can't place a value on that."

Howard says: "For me, as a therapist, what really makes me tick is knowing how these fantastic treatments and products are going to help people." Gibson agrees: "I think that would be the reward for all of those involved: to get all the guest feedback forms saying that this is something they really enjoyed."

Although Gibson admits that the timing of the launch at the height of a global recession is far from ideal, he's remaining positive. He concludes: "I think it will offer some glimmer of hope to people, something positive. I think it will actually motivate a lot of people and give them a reason to come and see us." ●