

au naturel beauty

It's more than skin deep

By Dick Broom
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Hayley Merchant stood nude except for a strategically placed patch for several hours last Thursday as artist Monty Knowles meticulously covered nearly every inch of her body with paint.

While he applied the finishing touches, guests in the garden behind Bella Spa in Northeast Harbor sampled organic hors d'oeuvres, sipped ginger-apple juice shots and chatted with the artist and model.

The "Raw Beauty" body painting demonstration was Bella's way of promoting its evolution from a skin and body boutique that focused primarily on external beauty to more of a complete nutrition and wellness spa.

"We started with organic skin care and then gradually realized that so much of health comes from the inside," said Bella owner Kristen Tucker.

Bella has an organic kitchen in which chef Hilery Hutchinson prepares an array of foods that are all raw and plant based. For example, she makes chips from dehydrated juice pulp.

"Our team knows exactly what phytochemicals and nutrients your body needs before any treatment you come in for," Ms. Tucker said. "For example, there are ginger shots to help alleviate pain before a customized massage, wheatgrass shots to energize you before personal training and blue-green algae shots before your specialized skin care treatment."

Bella grows many of its own herbs and other edible plants in its backyard garden and buys some produce from area farmers markets and co-ops.

"We seek out the purest organic products and the most effective ways to rebalance and revitalize the body," Ms. Tucker said. "Our goal is to help clients achieve health on a cellular level."

She said better health and maximum beauty can be achieved by cleansing the body of preservatives and other chemicals in the typical American diet that she describes as "toxic."

"The cleaner you are, the

"It was lovely, really lovely."

— Haley Merchant

healthier you are, the better you feel and the longer you live," Ms. Tucker said. "It's unbelievable what the body can do if you give it the right nutrients."

For example, she said, most skin problems are the result of what's going on inside the body.

Ms. Tucker is an aesthetician, or skin care specialist, and a licensed Pilates instructor. She has been a consultant to several luxury spas around the country.

Bella offers nutrition and wellness coaching as well as a variety of fitness classes including yoga, Pilates and core fusion. It also offers organic skin care products.

The body painting demonstration was "a celebration of the raw essence of beauty in nature and in ourselves," said Kristin Holley, an aesthetician at Bella.

Mr. Knowles, the artist, was an architect in the Bahamas, which is still his home base.

"I walked away from architecture and was doing photography," he said.

Then, a friend who did body painting asked him to paint her, and he discovered he was good at it and enjoyed it. Now, he paints women's bodies and photographs the results.

The day before he painted Ms. Merchant, he painted Ms. Tucker. Then, he photographed her in a dramatic pose, flanked by Ms. Merchant and Ms. Hutchinson — both nude but with hands covering their chests. The photo shows the three women from the waist up.

Ms. Merchant, who is a therapist at Bella, said that spending nearly all day on her feet while Mr. Knowles painted her was an exhausting but fun experience.

"It was lovely, really lovely," she said. "I felt so nourished and so loved and very cared for and accepted. And that's the whole point. That's why we have transformed Bella into a wellness sanctuary, because we want everyone to feel that way."

After the artist and all of the guests had left, Ms. Merchant reverted to her natural appearance.

"It took a little scrubbing, but the paint all washed off," she said.



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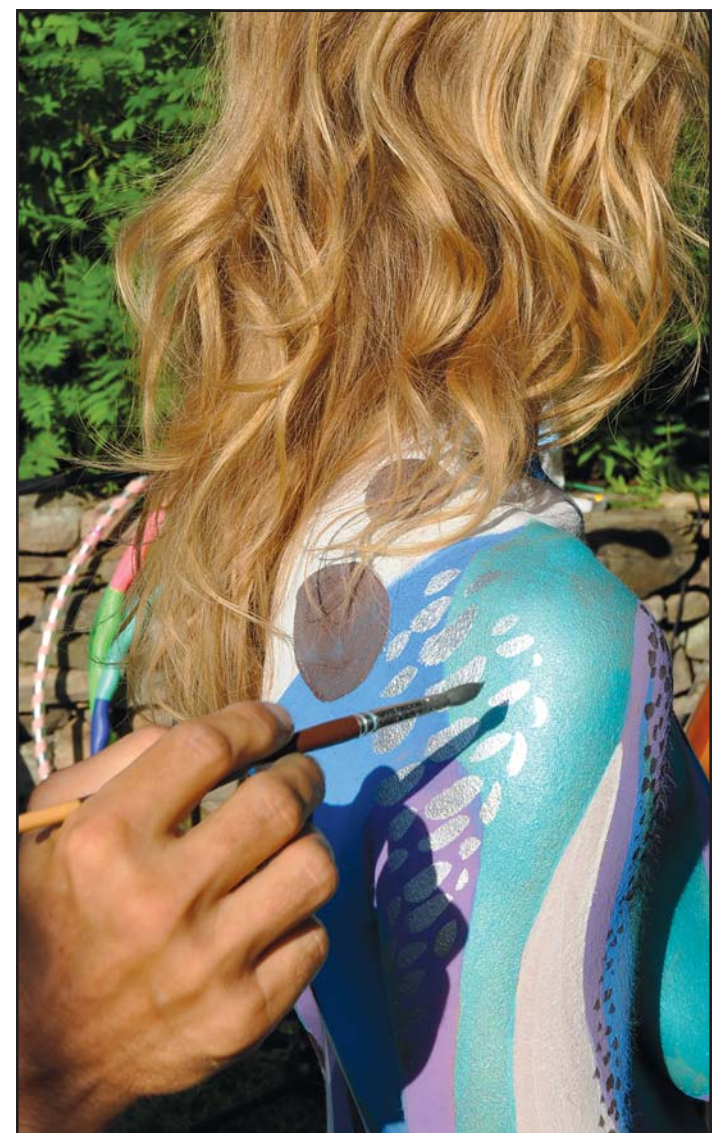
Pretty in pink and blue, Hayley Merchant, above, takes a break from having her body painted last Thursday in the garden at Bella Spa in Northeast Harbor. Herbs and other plants from the garden go into recipes created by Bella chef Hilery Hutchinson, below.



Body artist Monty Knowles touches up the paint on Hayley Merchant's hand.



Spa owner Kristen Tucker poses next to a photograph of herself that Monty Knowles, left, took after painting her body the previous day.



Monty Knowles adds silver accents to Hayley Merchant's shoulder.