

Brazilians, sugar and vulvas: Intimate care a growing multi-million dollar industry in Singapore



Local sugaring studio Sugar(ed) turns four this year, and is credited for bringing in the hair removal method of sugaring to Singapore. ST PHOTO: ALPHONSUS CHERN

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SINGAPORE - She has tended to the intimate hair removal of more than 3,000 women in Singapore over about four years. But Ms Nurul Ashikin, 30, used to work with machine parts before lady ones.

Ms Shikin, as she prefers to be called, used to do manual jobs in factories but chanced upon a job opening online in 2012, for a new company whose services were confidential. At the interview, she balked when told the job would involve hair removal and handling private parts.

The company was the predecessor business to Sugar(ed), Singapore's first and only dedicated sugaring studio now four years old in the market. Ms Shikin was part of the core team of four first set up by Sugar(ed) founder Jasmine Yong.

The studio specialises in sugaring, a method of hair removal which uses a ball of sugar paste rolled over the skin to remove hair from its root.

While caring for one's nether regions was once a hush-hush topic in the past, the dainty business of intimate care has been on the rise in recent years, with the introduction of methods like sugaring and the steady expansion of local chains and salons.

Local waxing chain and industry leader Strip, which started with one outlet here in 2002, now has 16 in Singapore and 53 worldwide - in cities including New York, London, Shanghai and Mumbai.

Credited with popularising Brazilian waxing and Intense Pulsed Light (IPL) hair-removal treatments here, the company under the Spa Esprit Group declined to reveal revenue figures, but said that demand for intimate grooming is growing.

Laser hair removal has also been steadily growing - for those who like their grooming even more painless, and are willing to fork out for it.

Since launching in 2018, local laser hair removal studio Supersmooth has seen a more than 300 per cent increase in customers, says founder Chris Soh, 42.

Supersmooth's biggest sell has been its ability to "treat the entire range of Asian skin tones, especially clients of richer skin tones", he says. While IPL is a popular hair-removal method, it is less suitable for clients with more melanin in their skin, as that makes them more susceptible to burns.

The studio opened a second outlet in Far East Square in November 2019 to cope with demand. "We had to open the second location really quickly," Mr Soh adds.

Along with grooming the intimate area, care for it has become a profitable business too.

In Singapore, spending on intimate hygiene products - which include intimate washes and wipes specifically targeted for cleansing the external vaginal area - increased from US\$7 million in 2015 to US\$7.9 million in 2019, according to market research provider Euromonitor International.

Ms Annabel Tan, 25, is grateful for all the new options, and has taken advantage of the growing industry to explore new hair-removal methods in her grooming routine.

The writer at a luxury magazine first started out with waxing at Strip, before progressing to IPL at a salon in Holland Village. She now goes for a type of laser hair removal treatment at a clinic in Oxley Tower every three weeks.

"My hair-removal now is 10 times better than when I first started. Waxing was extremely painful and not that effective, plus it caused ingrown hairs sometimes," she says. "(My current treatment) is the best option I've tried so far because it's practically painless and seems to be the most effective in terms of permanence."

At the beginning, it took Ms Shikin around 50 customers to start feeling comfortable on the job. Training involved learning how to handle the sugar paste, starting from the legs and progressing to Brazilians.

Did it make her blush?

"I'm a very rough person, so I thought this was such a girly job," she says with a giggle. "I was nervous because you are dealing with a private area. But you have to be confident - if not how are you going to make (customers) feel comfortable?"

These days, she sees about eight clients a day, and has handled over 750 virgin Brazilians - what Sugar(ed) calls their first-time customers - without batting an eyelid.

SUGARING: A NEW WAY TO GROOM



Sugaring is a method of hair removal which uses a ball of sugar paste rolled over the skin to remove hair from its root. ST PHOTO: ALPHONSUS CHERN

The simple concoction of sugar, lemon juice and water has become a winning formula for 34-year-old Jasmine Yong. Responsible for introducing body sugaring to Singapore, the former air stewardess started Sugar(ed) in 2016 after noticing a gap in the grooming market here.

The trend had been taking off in the United States in the late 2000s, says Ms Yong, who had been living in Seattle then, and discovered sugaring via e-commerce marketplace Groupon in 2010.

"Once I tried it, I never went back - it was one of the least painful Brazilians I'd ever had," says Ms Yong, who had tried various hair-removal methods prior.

When she moved home in 2012, she tried to bring the trend here, having undergone sugaring training in Los Angeles. A failed partnership stint and leftover stock led her to strike out as a home sugarist, starting with just five clients and relying on word-of-mouth.

In four years, her clientele snowballed to around 600, and she set up Sugar(ed)'s first studio in Bukit Timah in 2016.

Since then, Sugar(ed) has grown from a team of four - Ms Yong included as the head sugarist - to almost 40. She trains all her therapists personally, and occasionally runs quality checks by having them practise on her.

She also opened her fourth and newest outlet in Upper Thomson in June 2019. Sugar(ed) now has a database of close to 19,000 customers, and the mostly female clientele range from 20 to 40 in age. While the studio also offers facial sugaring and for other parts of the body, Brazilians (\$70) remain their most popular service.

"There's definitely a growing trend for sugaring because it's all-natural," says Ms Yong, adding that it is especially popular among pregnant mums. "The intimate area, making it clean and nice, is something that people are more open to now. Personal self-care is becoming something everybody wants to do."

INTIMATE HEALTH: NEW TREATMENTS AND PRODUCTS



Strip's Advanced Fluorescence Technology is an improved treatment to reduce hair regrowth that drastically weakens hair follicles with less pain. PHOTO: STRIP

With more prioritising intimate care, treatment innovation has evolved with demand.

At Strip, treatments are updated annually, to deliver the most effective treatment efficacy to customers, said Ms Samantha Ong, 35, the company's marketing director of beauty and wellness.

Their most recent include Advanced Fluorescence Technology (AFT), an improved treatment to reduce hair regrowth that drastically weakens hair follicles with less pain. Using a gradual heating system which lowers the risk of burns, the device called AFT Total Comfort 3.0 was developed by Strip with global laser manufacturer Alma Lasers, and has replaced the pre-existing IPL machines in all of Strip's Singapore stores.

In 2017, Strip launched the Rosebud Vajuvenation treatment - touted as a facial for the vulva meant to firm and lift skin in the intimate area. And in 2018, founder of Spa Esprit Group Cynthia Chua launched Two L(i)ps, a luxury range of vulva care products, as a means to "give people options" to look after themselves.



Two L(i)ps first launched with a single charcoal mask for the vulva area, and has since expanded its product line to include a hyaluronic acid serum to moisturise, Vitamin C serum for brightening, and a peptide-36 cream to even out skin tone down under. PHOTO: TWO L(i)PS

With over 20,000 customers presently, Two L(i)ps hit their first million in sales within the first year of the launch. To date, the brand which ships worldwide has sold over 54,000 products to 27 cities.



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To the raised eyebrows and doubtful looks, the 49-year-old hair-removal doyen challenges: "If you care enough to ensure regular facial appointments are booked, why not extend the same love and effort to the vulva?"

Through conversations with Strip customers, therapists and friends, she realised many women shared "vulva woes" that had no platform to be aired on nor specialised products to help address.

"I've come to realise that many women are not aware of the difference between the vulva and vagina. I think many also generalise the vagina and vulva as (both) being self-cleaning, hence the idea of vulva care is often misconstrued and labelled as unnecessary gimmicks." The vulva, a sum of many external parts, is not self-cleaning, she clarifies.

Two L(i)ps first launched with a single charcoal mask for the vulva area, and has since expanded its product line to include a hyaluronic acid serum to moisturise, Vitamin C serum for brightening, and a peptide-36 cream to even out skin tone down under. Save for the mask, all products are formulated to be safe for use anywhere else on the body, including the face.

The brand will launch six more products in 2020, with the full product range consisting of 19 products by 2021.

Good feedback from customers and friends has encouraged Ms Chua - and the brand's quick growth points to healthy demand.

"There's always a risk that the market is not ready, and consumers aren't ready to accept a new concept. But all the products and brands that I've created stem from an existing need or gap that I see in the market - it's solutions to real problems," she says.

"The intimate care industry will continue to experience huge growth and evolve worldwide but vulva care is still at its infant stages. As more people become open to the concept of head-to-toe holistic care, I think they will be more receptive to the idea of a vulva ritual, just like their face's skincare ritual."

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