

healing earth

Inspired by Africa's ancient healing traditions, Healing Earth is a luxury, natural and sustainable spa brand that combines premium products and therapies with international training protocols and consultancy. Here, the company's founder, Elisabeth Brandt, shares her vision

What's your background?

I've been in this industry for 25 years. I was born in Slovenia and started out in hotels in Europe, before moving to South Africa 15 years ago to open one of the country's first five-star spas: the Sérénité Wellness Centre in Cape Town. We took a very holistic approach, offering yoga, meditation, detox and life coaching, which was new in South Africa at the time. It was very successful: our average occupancy was 95 per cent and we had visitors from all over the world.

A few years later, I was asked to create a turnkey concept for another spa resort, in which I was a shareholder. That was Santé Wellness Centre in the Stellenbosch Wine-lands, South Africa's first vinotherapy spa. I've also consulted on numerous other luxury spas in South Africa and Namibia.



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What inspired you to set up Healing Earth?

While running my own spas, I was very unhappy with the products available, which were full of parabens and other synthetic ingredients. It didn't make sense to me that we were offering fantastic organic foods and detox programmes, while the products used in our spa treatments were so impure.

So I started researching alternatives, and came up with a Pinotage grapeseed oil, using ingredients sourced from local farmers, which I developed into a range of Pinotage vinotherapy products. Then, six years ago, I decided to sell my interests in Sérénité and Santé in order to concentrate on developing a holistic, pure and natural product line. We launched Healing Earth in 2007.

How would you sum up your brand concept?

We take a nurturing, conscious approach to beauty, based on love for oneself, humanity and the Earth. We follow sustainable and fair-trade practices to create natural products that deliver proven results, and we're proud ambassadors of Africa's indigenous heritage.

Can you tell us a bit more about your main product lines?

Our two main ranges are Pinotage Vinotherapy and Earth Soul. Pinotage is a facial and body range which leverages the strong antioxidant

qualities of vitamin C, vitamin E and proanthocyanidins (OPC) found in the seeds, skin and leaves of Pinotage, South Africa's signature red wine grape. OPC is one of the most potent free-radical fighters available, about 50 times stronger than vitamin E.

Our body range, Earth Soul, harnesses the medicinal powers of South Africa's native plants, flowers and herbs, and includes oils, creams, butters, polishes, wraps and bath salts. However, unlike some of our competitors, we don't only use the well-established African ingredients of rooibos, marula and aloe ferox. Every one of our products contains active ingredients that have been carefully researched and selected with a specific goal in mind – so, for example, we use Kalahari melon for its excellent moisturising properties, African ginger for firming and slimming, mongongo nut for detox, and coffee, orange and cinnamon for cellulite.

Why did you decide to focus on South African healing traditions and ingredients?

I'd studied local healing techniques in Bali, India and Thailand and had seen first-hand how effective indigenous treatments could be, but to the best of my knowledge no one in the spa industry had really explored African healing traditions and I was interested

to see how much potential there was.

I bought a book called *Medicinal Plants of South Africa* by Nigel Gericke, Ben-Erik van Wyk and Bosch van Oudtshoorn, which opened my eyes to the multitude of medicinal plants in the country and the many ways they could be used – for example, my daughter had been born with bad neurodermatitis, but after treating her with some of these natural remedies her condition improved dramatically. So I decided to come up with a concept that would draw on these incredible ingredients and traditions, as well as the very powerful energy of the African sun.

How much research has gone into your products?

The products have been developed in close consultation with John Knowlton, an internationally renowned cosmetics-industry scientist based in Johannesburg, who previously held senior positions with Johnson & Johnson and Justine-AVON. John compiled the product



information files for the brand, and conducted extensive scientific trials, while Dr John Hopkins, another leading scientist based in London, carried out toxicology tests to ensure the products are 100 per cent toxin-free and ready for the market.

How natural and sustainable are your products?

When I was developing the range, I was very inspired by *The Green Beauty Guide* by Julie Gabriel, which really opened my eyes. None of our products contain any potentially harmful, synthetic chemicals, such as parabens, formaldehyde-based preservatives, sulphate-based detergents, or artificial enhancers, dyes or fragrances. We only buy ingredients that have either been organically grown on local farms or wild-harvested in a sustainable way. We also strive to make our packaging as environmentally friendly as possible, using only biodegradable or recyclable materials, such as wood and glass.

How much of a focus is fair trade?

It's very important – we're committed to promoting the development of Africa and empowering local farmers, and we work very closely with local communities. We've just applied for Fair Trade certification through the Fair Trade Foundation in the Netherlands, and will be working towards achieving that this year.

What kind of treatments do you offer?

We offer a vast range of signature treatments, but our priority is to create a menu that meets the client's needs. For operators with a holistic focus, we might recommend an energy treatment linked to the body's chakras, while for those who want something simpler, we'll concentrate on treatments using established techniques.

However, all our signature treatments begin the same way, with the African Foot Cleanse, which combines a traditional foot-cleansing

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ritual with a short reflexology test and consultation. This really helps the therapist and client to connect before the treatment begins, in a way that simply isn't possible in a typical consultation, where the therapist just sits in front of the client and fills out a questionnaire.

What's your training philosophy?

The people we train are the ambassadors of our brand, and we believe you can't give to other people if you don't look after yourself. So as well as the usual product and treatment training, we've created a short programme of yogic breathing and meditation to help our therapists clear their energy when they arrive at work, and we encourage them to repeat it when they get home, too. We help them take care of themselves so they can give more of themselves to the client.

What's next for Healing Earth?

We've just launched a green hotel amenity range and we're developing some new accessories to complement our African concept.

On the research and development side, we're running a pilot project with one of our partner farms to produce ingredients using biodynamic methods – a sustainable approach to farming that's strongly influenced by the rhythms of the sun, moon and planets. We're also researching the energetic properties of different indigenous African stones, such as amethyst and quartz, with a view to incorporating this into our product development.

Another priority is widening our distribution network. We already work with many top spas in South Africa and Namibia, we have distributors in Germany, the Benelux countries and the US, and we're about to sign a contract with a distributor in Russia and the Middle East. On the consulting side, we're setting up a unique green spa in the Winelands, as well as working on several exciting developments in Mozambique, so we're feeling very positive about the future. ●