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Rehab Chic:
Recovering
In Style

Sports Knight:
England's Soccer Stud

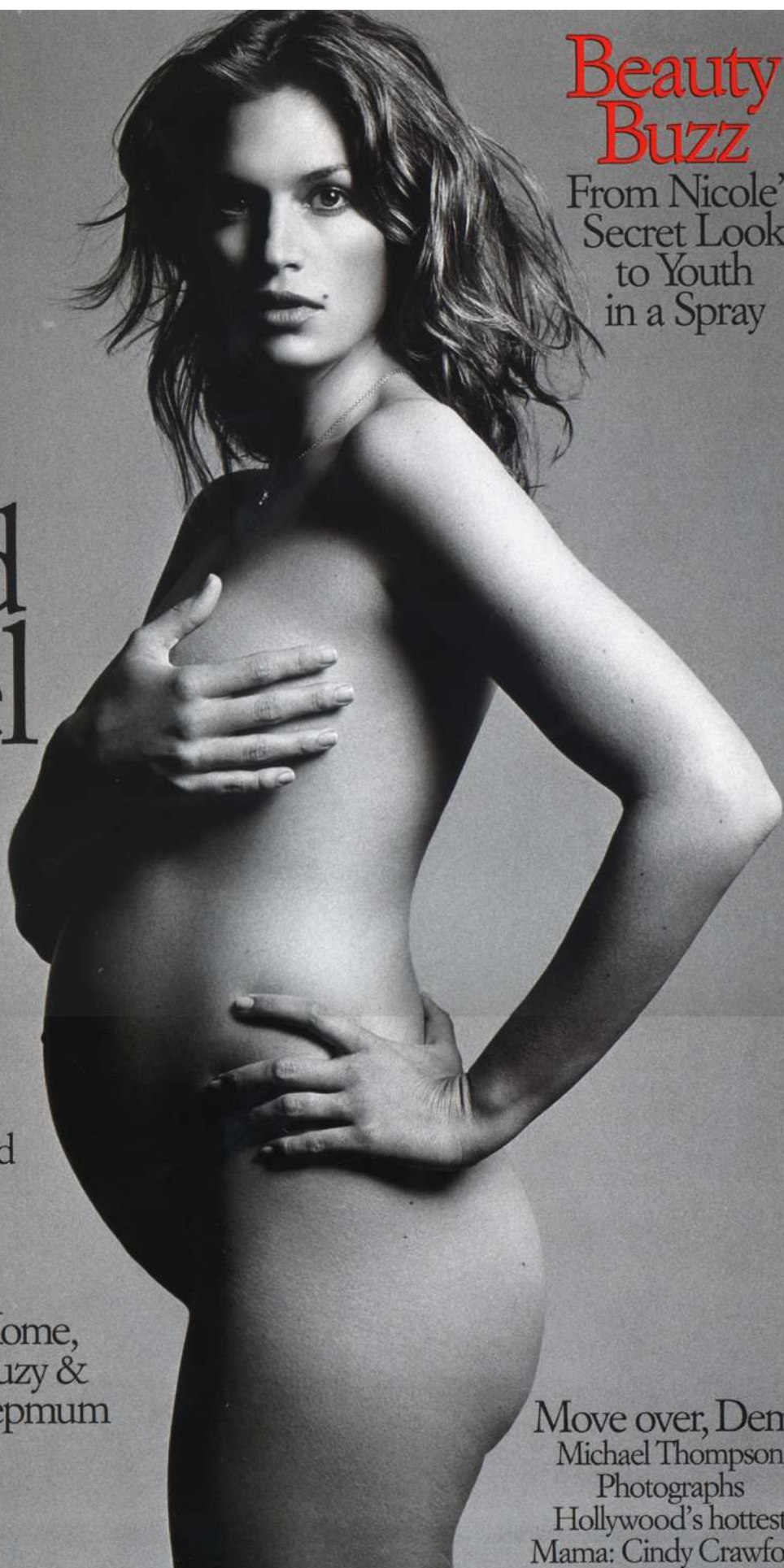
The Queen of
Wall Street

Plus: Anna Sui at Home,
The Annenbergs, Suzy &
Di's Unsinkable Stepmum



Beauty Buzz

From Nicole's
Secret Look
to Youth
in a Spray



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Photographs
Hollywood's hottest
Mama: Cindy Crawford

The Odd Couple

Will newlyweds LVMH and Bliss live happily ever after? Let the honeymoon begin.

PHOTOS BY ROBERT WRIGHT

Marcia Kilgore is *not* a fanatical cult leader. True, she's highly charismatic and wants to spread her message around the world. Yes, she does have thousands of zealous followers who swear she works miracles with her hands. And then there are all those pamphlets.

But Kilgore's headquarters is a bright, spacious SoHo spa, and her mission a highly secular one: to pamper the masses. Since opening Bliss Spa in 1996, Kilgore has attracted hordes of devotees by offering exceptionally indulgent treatments in a fun, even kooky atmosphere.

This year, she lured the biggest convert of all: French luxury conglomerate LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton, which acquired Bliss in a move that took the beauty industry by surprise. As a result of the merger, Kilgore, 30, is a multimillionaire and the executive director of a new company: Bliss World. Now, she says, she finally has the muscle and the

Credit Suisse First Boston, who initiated LVMH's courtship of Bliss. "[LVMH head] Bernard Arnault is the one who put Michael Kors in Céline, Marc Jacobs into Vuitton and Narciso Rodriguez into Loewe," Zauder points out. "He is always trying to make things new and fresh and different."

Kilgore started giving facials on the floor of her East Village apartment in 1989 and went on to open Let's Face It, a tiny space in SoHo. Already responsible for some of the world's most famous skin—Uma, Oprah, Cindy and Madonna—she launched Bliss Spa. Its trademark blend of professional service and quirky, inventive treatments filled a previously unnoticed gap in the spa market. With the help of business partner Thierry Boué (whom she married last month), Kilgore has elevated the spa into a mini empire that includes a mail-order business and two proprietary lines, Bliss and Remède. Kilgore's staffers are a wacky, energetic bunch, some of whom have second careers as actors, opera singers, yoga



From left: Marcia Kilgore and director of puBlissity Mara Stern; the Bliss Out call center at Bliss World headquarters; T-shirts made to celebrate the deal, top; Bliss World's cast of characters; the Remède product line.

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capital she needs to make Bliss a household name. "Before, we were winging it—to great reviews," she says. "Now if we have a great idea, we can actually do it."

At first glance, Bliss seems an unlikely match for LVMH, which also owns such traditional French brands as Givenchy, Christian Dior and Guerlain. Kilgore, after all, is a woman who offers a massage called the Tunnel of Rub, gives Mud Puddle pedicures in a fake beach setting, and walks around the spa saying "Totally, man!" like an Eighties valley girl.

Pierre Malvet, director of acquisitions for LVMH, admits that Bliss was an unusual suspect for the conglomerate. "Initially, we did not particularly want to invest and develop a spa business because it's very hard to run," he says. "But frankly, we fell in love with Marcia, and we felt there was a lot more than meets the eye in Bliss—it is a great brand." The match is not really as odd as it seems, according to Gail Zauder of

instructors and real-estate agents. "We are such a cast of characters," says Mara Stern, the company's PR chief whose official title is director of puBlissity. "Nothing is normal here. This job gives me license to be a nut." The approach is obviously working well: There's currently a three-to-six-month wait for a basic facial.

As part of the deal with LVMH, Kilgore and Boué both received a chunk of money up front, probably \$10 million, and they'll continue to get more as Bliss World hits certain targets. Jointly, the couple owns 30 percent of the company. And while the press has estimated the total value of the transaction at \$30 million, Kilgore and Boué admit that their compensation may ultimately be much higher than that figure.

Kilgore has no fears about losing her creative influence under the new deal. "It's not possible," she says. "I maintain creative control. It was the most important part of the deal from the beginning. What company would

The Odd Couple

be so dumb as to take a winning formula and take away the formula?"

Malvet says he hopes to free Kilgore from administrative chores so that she can focus on the creative things she loves best: writing silly copy for the catalog, the Web site and the ubiquitous signs and pamphlets scattered about the spa. She personally writes every product description in the quarterly Bliss Out catalog, which has a circulation of 750,000. Describing the Stila mascara in a 1996 issue, she wrote, "It's okay if sometimes your friends are flaky. A good mascara, however, would never be. Maybe mascara can be your friend." Even in the bathroom, clients can't escape Kilgore's pithy humor: "These products are here for your convenience," reads one sign. "They will, however, explode in your bag if removed from this room."

"It's entertainment," she explains. "We are trying to give someone a pleasurable time for an hour and a half. Having people laugh in the bathroom makes them feel good."

Now, the question is: Will the LVMH deal keep Bliss' loyal clients feeling good? Fans of the catalog will be pleased to learn it will adopt a

Chicago and either Los Angeles or San Francisco. Malvet stresses that the expansion will be gradual so that standards can remain high. "We do not want to see any dilution of what's been so successful at Bliss," he says. "We do not want to run a chain of spas. We want to be the best spas."

For those in need of a quick fix, the new Bliss Out stores will allow clients to drop in for a last-minute manicure or shopping spree. "We'll have these incredibly pristine manicure bars in an apothecary-type setting where you can also get a smoothie," says Kilgore. "Come in, read the mags, get a manicure, have a smoothie and split. Everyone will be able to book their manicures over the Web and reserve with a credit card. You'll probably be able to get a quick wax there, too. When you need a place to get your lip waxed, *now!* If you can see it, imagine how many people have seen it before you? Good God, man!"

Kilgore is also developing a line of professional products that will be sold directly to other spas. And she's absolutely serious about making the Bliss brand name known worldwide. "Bliss has to be a household name," she says. "There's the Gap. There's Bliss." She's currently designing Spa



From left: Bliss stuff; spa gatekeeper Jordan Stein and head aesthetician Beata Lukomski; the gallery at Bliss World headquarters; partners in Bliss, Thierry Boué and Kilgore.

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more magazine-like format. "It will still be a good read," says Kilgore, "and we're planning to bring in guest editors to write editor's picks."

Product junkies will delight in new additions to the Bliss and Remède lines as well as a new line of soaps called Just Add Water. Furthermore, a top-secret color cosmetics project is in development and will be available next spring. The spa will become a shopping destination in itself, offering merchandise from small, undiscovered designers—and going way beyond moisturizers and shampoos. One new product is Violet Shade, a line of parasols in retro kimono-esque fabrics treated to block UVA and UVB rays.

Spa-goers, meanwhile, can look forward to more Bliss locations worldwide. In New York this November, an uptown branch will open in the new LVMH building on 57th Street. The architects are experimenting with floating feathers, rubber floors and Jello-style massage beds, while the rooms are being designed to allow clients to have several treatments at once. Next spring will bring a Miami outpost, followed by London,

Cards that will allow clients to re-create Bliss Spa treatments at home—using Bliss products, of course. "You can find instructions on the Web site or on cards in stores," says Kilgore. "It's about making Bliss really fun and getting more people involved."

That, however, has never been a problem for Bliss. The company's Web site, blissworld.com, currently draws 100,000 shoppers per day. Even Kilgore's recent decision to move BlissWorld's headquarters to a deserted warehouse in Brooklyn has not taken her away from the action. Last month, Steven Meisel rented out the company's space to shoot Versace's fall campaign with Amber Valletta.

But when it comes to facials, Valletta—a longtime client—still has to wait her turn like everybody else. Not even LVMH's bankers receive special treatment when they try to get into Bliss. "This hasn't made it any easier for me to get an appointment," laments Credit Suisse's Zauder. "And I really need a facial."

—ANN MARIE GARDNER