

## The coolest corner shop

**O**n the corner of 13th Street and Third Avenue, in New York City's East Village, stands a 153-year-old pharmacy that has become a Manhattan landmark. It was one of the first chemists to dispense penicillin - but that's not the reason for its notoriety. Antique stoppered bottles, sets of scales and a human skeleton are still displayed inside, although medicine is no longer for sale.

Instead, the corner store, named after its first owner, John Kiehl, is the epicentre of a cult beauty brand that has broken all the rules. In a country where advertising is obligatory, Kiehl's reputation grew by word of mouth alone. It shunned sexy imagery and glossy packaging in favour of utility. As it launches its first-ever perfume, Original Musk, in December, Kiehl's now has the second-most sold international reach of L'Oréal behind it. Yet, even as it increases sales and opens new stores worldwide, somehow Kiehl's has managed to retain the image of a neighbourhood apothecary.

Since the family-owned chemist began to scale back its pharmaceutical business in the 1960s, in concentrate on selling its own hair and skincare products, Kiehl's has become the quintessential New York beauty brand. "An august name in its field," proclaims the elderly concierge of the Carlyle Hotel, the only hotel in Manhattan where you'll find Kiehl's samples in every bathroom. Andy Warhol, perhaps suffering from open pores, used to buy the company's Blue Astringent in bulk from the East Village store. Former NYC Mayor Rudolph Giuliani was fond of sending Kiehl's gift boxes to visiting foreign dignitaries.

While Brits appreciate Kiehl's unfussy, New World image, Americans are seduced by the brand's heritage, unique in its field. The original chemist, simply called "Kiehl", opened in 1851 as an apothecary that specialised in virility creams, leeches and anti-baldness lotions.

In 1921, Irving Morse, a pharmacology graduate and former apprentice to founder John Kiehl, purchased the small store and turned it into a conventional pharmacy, while keeping his employer's name on the signage. From the 1960s, Irving's son Aaron Morse was the driving force behind Kiehl's transformation into a beauty brand whose products - many of them concocted with traditional herbal ingredients - were made on the premises.

It was a family chemist that became an international beauty brand. Can Kiehl's cling to its no-frills charms now that L'Oréal holds the reins? By **Susie Rushton**



Cult cosmetics: the New York branch of Kiehl's still trades at its original site in the East Village

It was Aaron Morse, a former fighter pilot in the US Army, who began several idiosyncratic traditions that have remained to the present day. Kiehl's has always scorned advertising, and instead gives away large amounts of free samples. This act of generosity has done wonders for the company image, which is almost dementedly friendly and approachable in comparison to the haughty French brands.

Kiehl's scores highly with the "non-designed" design of their products, too, an anti-aesthetic that has influenced the beauty industry as a whole. Packaged in plain plastic stock bottles, creams and lotions aren't given glamorous or cod-scientific names. But they are instantly recognisable for

painstakingly detailed labels that list every ingredient (a company tradition introduced long before law required it) and, in surprisingly detailed terms, explain exactly how to use the product. Subtly, perhaps, Kiehl's is perceived as the "cleverer" beauty product. The white-coated staff at the stores are trained to give customers an "education" in their products rather than a sales pitch.

Thanks to its no-nonsense image, Kiehl's has also done well with men. Even before they accounted for 30 per cent of customers (as they do today),

men were made to feel at home at Kiehl's. "Aaron Morse was a motorcycle enthusiast and, in the early 1970s, he noticed that the guys coming into the Kiehl's store were bored," says Carmine



Montalto, a former English teacher whose job it is to write those verbose labels. "So, he brought 30 vintage bikes and put them in the store, and put sports on the TV."

The fact that the products are resolutely androgynous and practical-looking has also helped. The bikes

remain in pride of place at the East Village store, even though, nowadays, male customers are more likely to be interested in the anti-wrinkle creams than a Harley Davidson.

A third Morse generation - in the person of Aaron's daughter Jami Morse Heidegger - oversaw the greatest period of growth, in the late 1980s and 1990s. It was Morse Heidegger who both emphasised the "family" feel of the company and positioned it as a beauty brand (although, to this day, the only Kiehl's makeup sold is lipstick). She introduced the "Equine" grooming range when she became passionate about horses, and when she became pregnant, a baby range. Her intuitive approach paid off. In 1999, *The Wall Street Journal* ran a feature on Kiehl's headlined: "Ad Budget: Zero. Buzz: Deafening."

Of course, it helped that every celebrity, from Sharon Stone to Anna Wintour, has at one time or another cited a Kiehl's product as a favourite. So, when L'Oréal snapped up Kiehl's in 2000, it maintained a policy of "if it ain't broke, don't fix it", as one employee put it. In the past four years, Kiehl's stores have opened up across the US and around the world, London and Manchester included. Annual turnover is a tidy \$70m. But expansion of the product range has been surprisingly gradual. It was only after numerous requests from customers that the company launched so much as an eye make-up remover. Earlier this year, its first anti-ageing cream went on sale, prompting hand-wringing about whether it might contradict the company's reputation for honest, no-nonsense formulas.

The perfume, too, has caused some soul-searching. After all, what could be further away from the company's down-to-earth image than the high-gloss marketing of the fragrance business, an arena where advertising is paramount? The perfume industry is completely new territory," agrees Victoria Maddocks, the Welsh-born art director of Kiehl's. "It's a very sexy kind of imagery and that's not like Kiehl's at all - we're very family and clean and above board." Nevertheless, Original Musk, based on a "love potion" found in the basement of the pharmacy, will be launched just in time for the Christmas market. Once again, there is to be no advertising. For a more conventional company, this would be commercial suicide. But Kiehl's is used to being a bit different.