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By Savita Iyer-Ahrestani February 28th, 2013 Tags: Skin And Nutrition, Skin Science

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## Nordic Beauty: What's Their Secret?

Scandinavian women are known far and wide for their effortless, youthful beauty. What do they know that we don't? (Hint: It starts with berries.)





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*Danish actress Connie Nielsen, Swedish actress Malin Akerman, Danish supermodel Helena Christensen.*

Pernille Sporon-Boving, a Danish artist based in State College, Penn., has never done anything special to take care of her skin. She doesn't use expensive creams, she doesn't get facials and she doesn't wear any makeup.

And yet in her mid-40s, she needs no enhancing. The skin on her face is tight and glowing, with enviable smoothness and sheen. She is fit and healthy and a living example of the no-frills approach to beauty that's common to almost all Scandinavian and Nordic women, from Copenhagen to Reykjavik, and from Stockholm to Helsinki.

Theirs is a seemingly effortless and natural look that's admired and coveted by women the world over. But ask an expert like Annica Joensuu, head of the [Swedish Organization of Skin Therapy](#) (Sveriges Hudterapeuters Riksorganisation), a trade association for beauty schools and skin therapists in Sweden, what the secret is, and she'll laughingly chalk it up to just a thick moisturizer and "good genes."

Those good genes, though, are bolstered and perpetuated by two key ingredients: a healthy diet and an active, on-the-go-lifestyle, both of which contribute greatly to natural beauty and are just a part of life in the Nordic region.

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It's true: Although many women in the Nordic region arguably make a conscious choice not to be bogged down by the trappings of beauty—makeup, hair products and skin care regimes that require time and effort—their day-to-day lives in a part of the world where winters are long and hard just don't afford them the time and the space for excessive pampering, Joensuu says.

"We're lucky not to get sun most of the year here, so our skins are not exposed as much to its harshness," she says, but in a region where the winters are tough and long, where the balance between comfort and discomfort is tenuous at best, the primary focus is on "getting out and getting on with things by embracing nature and integrating it into our lives."

And that means applying a thick moisturizer on the face, bundling up in layers of warm clothing and grabbing a pair of skis, a sled or a bike (yes, even when it's snowing) and heading out the door, no matter the cold and the dark. "Sitting here now, I can't imagine just how much I did outside," says Sporon-Boving, who has lived in Denmark, Norway and Greenland. "I had two small kids and I dragged them everywhere with me in the coldest of weather. That just wouldn't happen here in the U.S., and if I think back it seems crazy, but that's just the way of life over there and you get used to it. You even start to enjoy it."

There's little doubt that living an active, outdoorsy life—particularly in the winter—does wonders for the metabolism by quickly burning unwanted fat. But taking a Nordic winter by the horns and reaping its benefits is not for the faint of heart, and it requires, above all else, a strong body. That's why healthy eating is all-important in that part of the world, and it's so much a part of the culture that it requires no special effort at all. The typical Nordic diet is rich in fiber and bursting with vitamins, minerals and antioxidants found in a range of leafy and root vegetables like carrots, beets, rutabagas and artichokes, all of which are everyday fare, Joensuu says. All those nutrients do wonders for the skin and body. For instance, vitamin A in carrots helps skin cells renew themselves and the surprisingly high vitamin C content in rutabagas (also known as Swedish turnips) is shown to prevent wrinkles.

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"No snacks for us," says Joensuu, but rather three full meals a day made up of whole grain cereals and breads, low-fat dairy products and lots of fish like herring, salmon and mackerel that are plump with Omega-3 and Omega-6 fatty acids to help fortify the membranes of the skin cells and guard against the formation of wrinkles.

And then of course, there are the berries. Not just any berries, but *Nordic* berries—super fruits that grow in a part of the world where the sun doesn't set in summer, and that are plumper, richer and exponentially more powerful than any berry anywhere else in the world. "They're soaking in sunlight around the clock for 24 hours straight," says Joe Pastorkovich, VP North America for Finnish skincare company [Lumene](#), "and this makes their vitamin and antioxidant properties a full 81 percent richer than any cultivated berry." Those vitamins and antioxidants have anti-inflammatory effects, which help keep skin young and plump and can even prevent heart attacks.

In the Nordic region, berries—blueberries, blackberries, raspberries, lingonberries, cloudberry, to name but a few—are ubiquitous. They're eaten plain or atop breakfast cereals, and they're mixed into desserts, cooked into jams and pressed to make juices and liqueurs.

Companies like Lumene have been harnessing the powerful properties of these berries, in particular the yellow Arctic cloudberry, which grows between August and October in the bogs and swamps of Sweden, Norway and Finland, to integrate them in a sustainable manner into various creams and skincare products. Lumene's flagship creams are made from the seed oil extracted from cloudberry when they're pressed into juice, says Josefin Backman, the company's Helsinki-based head of research and development.

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"The oil contains high amounts of Omega-6 and Omega-3, vitamins A and E, plant steroids and fatty acids, all of which are essential for keeping your skin barrier intact and in good condition," she says. "The cloudberry nectar that we use has phenolic compounds that contain detoxing properties to brighten and lighten the skin and keep it soft and supple."

To the extent that products like Lumene's are available on store shelves in the U.S., more women may have a chance to avail of the raw power of the Nordic region's natural bounty, in the hopes of cultivating the beauty of the women from there. Today, the Nordic diet is high profile, almost on par, studies have shown, with the Mediterranean diet for its health quotient.

But no matter the skincare options and the diet and the lifestyle choices that women may make or have available to them, there's one very important quality that Eric Post, Sporon-Boving's husband and a professor of biology at Penn State University, believes is key to the beauty of Nordic women: their strong sense of self-reliance. In a part of the world where women do everything that men do, where gender equality is barely an issue (in 2003, for example, Norway passed a law that would require 40 percent of directors for all public companies to be women, and the Nordic countries top global averages for the number of women in government), "these women are inherently independent and self-confident," Post says. "Beauty is an emergent property of this feeling, not, by contrast, something that can be contrived by adding to one's appearance."

Anyone who can find a way to harness and package that unique quality may well have found the secret to true beauty.

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