

How did a dermatologist with a theory that aging is a treatable disease end up with a best-selling salmon-based diet and a booming cosmetics business?

Perriconology

By Alex Witchel

“How old do you think I am?”

This is the kind of question Nicholas V. Perricone M.D. is often asked — but only by women convinced they look good enough to ask it. There were more than a few of them at a recent book-signing at the Barnes & Noble store on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, and by now this dermatologist knows enough to aim low.

“Forty-two,” he guessed, somewhat charitably.

“Fifty-three in April,” she trilled. “This is really prescient that you’re here today, because I have the hots for someone 20 years younger than me. My grandfather died at 99, and his doctor said he looked like a man of 60.”

Perricone, 56, signed her copy of his latest best seller, “The Perricone Promise,” which explains his three-tiered anti-aging program — diet, topicals and nutritional supplements — and allowed himself a small smile. “If you’re going to live till 99, maybe you should go for someone 30 years younger,” he suggested.

A middle-aged blond woman was next, clutching a piece of paper that listed the products she uses on her face. She leaned across the table toward Perricone, her voice pitched low.

“I would do *anything* to get an appointment with you,” she said intensely. The doctor seemed alarmed until she giggled. “Well, almost anything,” she amended.

He looked at the paper and shook his head. “Go across the street to Sephora,” he said. “My products are over there, and someone will help you get this straightened out.” She ran.

O.K., so who doesn’t want to look younger, especially without resorting to the risks and expense of plastic surgery? As the French say, after 40 a woman has to choose between her face and her fanny, and Perricone maintains that a little weight makes the face look younger. There is no starvation on his diet, though you do have to balance among fruits and vegetables high in antioxidants; protein, which for Perricone means an inordinate amount of wild salmon (“I’ve got gills now,” one woman told him); and nuts and oils — and still more salmon — for essential fatty acids. And though you can’t pile on the pasta, you can eat dark chocolate and cheat on Fridays.

Along with the diet, which he has flogged in all three of his best-selling books (2.4 million in print), including “The Perri-

Photograph by Eric Tucker



N. V. Perricone, MD

One Prescription" and "The Wrinkle Cure," he discusses his theories about aging, which have proved controversial in the academic medical community. Perricone says that aging is a progressive inflammatory disease that occurs at the cellular level of the body but that it can be controlled by what you eat. "Wrinkled, sagging skin is *not* the inevitable result of growing older," he writes. "It's a disease, and you can fight it." Statements like these have set some doctors wondering if Perricone's scientific research is as expert as his marketing department.

In addition to changing what you eat, he advocates using the topical treatments and nutritional supplements he has formulated through the years, both of which contain anti-inflammatory peptides and neuropeptides. He writes that these are proteinlike substances with the ability to "increase production of collagen and elastin," "repair scars and wrinkles" and "increase circulation, resulting in breathtaking radiance and glow." The products are sold in more than 230 outlets, everywhere from Neiman Marcus to QVC, and Perricone says 70 percent of the people who use them are women. A flagship store at 791 Madison Avenue, scheduled to open last fall, was delayed because of construction problems and is to open next month.

Perricone already has the West Coast glowing with customers like Jennifer Lopez, Julia Roberts and Jennifer Aniston. And internationally, the line is sold in six countries, with four more scheduled for later this year. People certainly seem to like what he makes: annual sales have grown from \$3 million in 2000 to \$50 million in 2004.

So, what's his big secret? Hard to say, exactly, but a two-pronged television campaign has been an enormous factor in fueling sales. The show-biz part of his pitch is an illustration of the three-day version of his diet that shows before and after shots of people willing to switch from cheeseburgers and beer to salmon, lettuce and water for 72 hours. The camera shows an inevitable loss of bloating, including a firmer jaw line and a usually recognizable radiance that Perricone says comes from the salmon. This demonstration has earned oohs and aahs on "Oprah," the "Today" show and "Good Morning America."

The pseudo-intellectual part is the lectures he has given on PBS during its national fund-raising drives since 2001, in which he discusses his anti-aging theories. He got that gig, he said, after a PBS producer saw him tape the talk show "Open Book" for A&E.

Then there's the doctor himself. The second of five children born to a bricklayer in a small town near New Haven, he has not even a whiff of the snob about him. Though his belief in his theories borders on the monomaniacal (his science experiments began at age 6), his social manner is low-key and unfailingly pleasant. At 5-foot-10 and a solid 200 pounds, he favors the kind of custom-

Alex Witchel is a staff writer for the magazine.

made suits worn by professional athletes, cut to accentuate the broad shoulders of a weight lifter. The collars on his shirts are as stiff and snowy as a nurse's cap, the cuff links are golden and so is the watch. The shoes are a rich, shining leather (even in an ice storm), and the hair is filled with product. If he owned a Super Bowl ring, he would be dais-ready for the Heisman Trophy dinner.

With the book signing finished, Perricone, with at least a dozen of his employees who had come for no apparent reason and stood around doing nothing for a full hour, headed across the street to Sephora, the retail beauty chain. This took some time, actually. When others started to cross against the light, one of Perricone's two bodyguards put a restraining arm in front of the doctor's chest, holding him in place.

When Perricone did enter the store, he was greeted by rousing applause. One saleswoman placed her hand over her heart.

"I love all your products, but I especially love your lip plumper," said a woman with lips to rival Mick Jagger's. "I use it all the time."

Perricone was quickly surrounded by Sephora staffers and customers. Among the white women at least, there was a uniform look to their faces: a pinkness in the skin and an unmistakable glow that conjured memories of prom night. Granted, these women were not past their 40's, but the effect was pronounced. The twice-divorced Perricone posed for photographs amid a considerable display of swinging hair and gleaming teeth.

The blond woman who had given him her list of products now held two Sephora bags. "I've got an appointment in three weeks with a plastic, but I want to try him first," she confided. "He's got the reputation to be the best." And how does she know that, exactly? She shrugged. "Oprah. Reading online at his Web site."

Her friend interjected: "A lot of it is common sense. But it doesn't hurt you, and it's fun."

The blond woman nodded. "Besides," she added, "why would all the celebrities use his products if they didn't love him?"

On a snowy January morning, Perricone gave me a tour of the Stony Creek section of Branford, Conn., where he grew up. "Our house is demolished," he said. "There's a Stop & Shop in its place."

His parents, Vincent, 81, and Mary, 80, have been married for 59 years and live nearby. One sister, a lawyer, is general counsel to Perricone's corporation. He pointed to another house. "I mowed that lawn for \$3.25, a huge amount of money then. And that's the church where I made my confirmation."

We also passed what used to be the Stony Creek School, which he attended before going on to East Haven High School and graduating as an English major from the University of New Haven.

He gestured toward a low green building. "That was a garage, and my brother and I used to

sneak in there and sit in the Bentleys and Rolls-Royces," he said. "That leather smelled so great."

A beat later, as he realized the conversation was poised to turn toward his newfound wealth, he shifted focus to his two pet projects. The first is a \$5 million gift to his medical-school alma mater, Michigan State University, to endow a nutritionally oriented dermatology department. The second is a pledge of \$1.2 million to the Catholic World Mission to establish a community center, school and health clinic on the outskirts of São Paulo, Brazil, to house and educate children and pregnant teenagers and protect them from the violent drug culture there. His involvement in this program earned him an audience with the pope.

We soon arrived at Perricone headquarters in Meriden, a squat, modern building that has been home to 50 employees for only six months. (Perricone still sees a handful of patients, but his focus is now on his business.) As he walked through the office, you could see the tiny jolts in the spines of his workers as they spotted him in residence, walking down long hallways lined with framed copies of his patents.

In his own captain-of-industry corner office, Perricone discovered that his new wooden desk, inlaid with physics formulas etched in gold leaf, had just arrived. The only personal touches were photographs of his two grown sons from his first marriage and his 8-year-old daughter, Caitlin, from his second.

When Perricone talks about his success, the tale often carries the slightly disingenuous ring of the Hollywood starlet, the one who picks up the phone and gets an instantaneous offer, or shows up somewhere and is plucked immediately from the crowd. Upon closer listening, the story emerges of a man driven by zeal — and a bullet-proof ego — who believes his personal mission in life is to be a wellness messiah, spreading the good word about his nutritional theories and the products he has created based on them.

"I was going to self-publish the book that became 'The Wrinkle Cure,'" he began. (Its original title, he says, was "Antioxidants as Natural Anti-Inflammatories for Improvement of Cellular Function.") "I thought it would be a book for doctors. I was the only one in the country doing topical antioxidant work, and another doctor heard me speak at a seminar and introduced me to his agent. That took me down a different road."

At the time of the book's publication in 2000, Perricone was an assistant clinical professor of dermatology at the Yale School of Medicine, a title he put on its cover. This bothered some on the Yale faculty, as it seemed to suggest a scientific basis for his findings, even though he had not followed the standard practice of making his research available to his peers for their review. Instead, he relied on his own research on diet, topicals and supplements over a 15-year period, seeing clinical results within his patient base of 15,000 in his general dermatology practice.

When I called Dr. Richard Edelson, chairman

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of dermatology at Yale School of Medicine, for comment, I was referred to the Yale Office of Public Affairs, which gave this statement: "Dr. Nicholas Perricone held an unpaid appointment as assistant clinical professor of dermatology at Yale School of Medicine. In that capacity he provided oversight to medical students in a clinical setting several times per year. His appointment expired in June 2002." I was also told that no one from the medical school would be available to talk about Perricone's theories of aging.

It in fact seemed impossible to find any doctor, dermatologist or otherwise, in four different cities, to go on the record when talking about Perricone, pro or con. That he used his medical credentials to sell his diet and products while skipping the peer-review process, seemed, in that world at least, a significant breach. An academic hematologist who has done research for almost 30 years said: "There is a Pygmalion complex in research where you fall in love with your own work. But the gold standard is, are there objective observers who can verify it? What is the data to support that diet switches off or retards inflammation? Where is the controlled, randomized, independent-observer study? Or is this anecdotal?"

Perricone defended the use of his Yale affiliation on the book's cover, citing other clinical faculty who had done the same. But he acknowledged that it made him a lightning rod for criticism. "That title of 'Wrinkle Cure' trivialized the contents," he said. "Thousands of academic dermatologists were out there gunning for it."

Perricone also acknowledged that he had no peer-reviewed research to support his claims for the diet. "I am not a Ph.D. nutritionist and should not be doing research on nutrition," he said. "I'm standing on the shoulders of other scientists and translating for people. I've gotten the message to millions that eating makes a huge difference in the way you feel. If you're eating salmon now, or taking fish-oil capsules, I've helped you."

We had settled at a round table in his office where we were served lunch: grilled wild salmon, green salad, mixed vegetables and jasmine green tea. One of Perricone's promises is that you can lose 10 pounds in six weeks just by quitting coffee, which he says boosts insulin and causes inflammation, and drinking green tea instead, which he says speeds the metabolism.

Whatever the questions about his scientific

methodology, no one has criticized the content of the diet itself. Marion Nestle, professor of nutrition at New York University, had told me: "The diet is based on scientific ideas that are very current, right at the cutting edge. But to say that food choices are directly responsible for wrinkles? I'm not aware of any nutritional evidence for that. What's so disturbing about 'The Perricone Promise' is the conflict of interest, because he's selling his products at a very high cost."

When I relayed this to Perricone, he was annoyed. "The logic doesn't flow," he said. "If I'm recommending lettuce to you and I'm selling creams, what's the conflict?"

Well, just that he is using a diet that looks like many others, the emphasis on salmon excepted, to get people to buy his products. These belong to a relatively new category known as cosmeceuticals and nutraceuticals. Though the terms imply the use of a prescription pharmaceutical, neither one falls under the umbrella of the F.D.A. as a drug. "We're trying to connote the fact that there's serious scientific research here," Perricone said, "even though it's a cosmetic or a vitamin. Buzzwords like these give people a way to identify products that are moving in the direction of science-based rather than marketing-based."

One identifying feature is price; a month of Perricone's supplements costs \$120. And a two-ounce bottle of a neuropeptide serum costs \$570.

"That's only one article that I sell out of 40, which is very effective in terms of making you look more youthful," he said. "The products start as low as \$30, but none of them are going to do anything to your internal organs, O.K.? That's why diet is the most important thing, and the rest is optional. You can go to the pharmacy and get an anti-aging cream for \$15 or \$20. But if it doesn't work, isn't it infinitely expensive?"

It took Perricone 10 years to get his products on the market, beginning with the idea of licensing them. "I went to every major corporation in the world and presented my research," he said, his food forgotten on the plate. "But no one was willing to utilize it in their products. Finally, a very nice man took me aside and said: 'We make products with oil and water and perfume and we're making outrageous profits. We don't care about efficacy. We don't have to. You're asking me to take expensive components and put them in our products, but it's not going to make a damn dif-

ference in the performance of our bottom line."

Soon after that encounter, in 1996, a discouraged Perricone gave a lecture in Washington about the future of skin-care treatment. Buyers from Nordstrom heard him speak, took his lab samples and asked if they could carry his product line.

"I said, 'You don't understand; I don't have a line,'" he recalled. He got one soon enough, designing the packaging at his kitchen table. "It went from 1 to 8 to 16 stores and kept growing," he said. "So that's how I got sucked into the business end. Licensing would have been easier. But I basically feel that I was forced to do it. Otherwise I'd throw away everything I worked on."

"And oh, by the way," he added, "since I became a success, many companies became interested in licensing the technology. Because now they have to compete against something that truly works, and their hype is not going to do it. Over the past four or five years, I'd say I've been approached by 10 major companies to buy my company, offering me hundreds of millions of dollars. The best Ph.D. research people the companies can buy have told me: 'You're the only one that's discovered this. How come you?' But I feel once the company would be taken over, it would be destroyed. They would start diluting the contents and not focus on the diet aspect. And so my whole being would be changed."

He has certainly had the last laugh, for now. Which has done nothing to mitigate his peers' animosity. One dermatologist said: "There is so much jealousy in this field. If he wasn't making \$50 million and having a star-studded clientele, no one would care. Do you know how many people try to do the same thing and never pull it off? What makes him different is that he did it better."

Perricone was quick to agree. "It doesn't make anyone angry that dermatologists are injecting Botox or Restylane into people and making several million dollars a year in their practices," he told me. "But let's complain about Perricone, who's recommending a balanced diet, getting enough sleep, not smoking, doing moderate exercise, taking nutritional supplements and using topicals rather than going for cosmetic surgery."

He pushed back from the table. "I appeal to people's vanity because the results of my program are visible, positive. Everything else will happen automatically. You will decrease your risk of heart disease and cancer. Your weight will normalize. Your mood will be elevated. You'll have less need for medications. So that should be our goal. As a physician, you've got to keep people healthy rather than treat the sick."

He looked distracted for a moment, seeming to mull the criticisms of his work. But glumness isn't his way. "You know," he recalled, "once, after I had given a lecture at a conference, a fellow scientist told me: 'I just want you to remember one thing. You can always recognize the pioneers by the number of arrows in their back.'" Perricone's gaze was steady. "I always keep that in mind." ■

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