

Ceratum Galeni, 2c CE

Few people know that cold cream has a history dating back to the 2c CE. Even fewer know that the physician credited with its invention recommended it as a fertility treatment applied to a man's testicles. Though that use continued, within a very short amount of time it was appropriated for faces by well-groomed people of all genders.

"...and after the bath to anoint the entire loins with some of the cooling ointments. These are the so-called crude oil, and omphacine oil, and the rose and honey oil made from this."

Galen's On Hygiene. 2nd c.

Chapter XIV - Sex Hygiene and Personal Hygiene

In fact, it is the oldest continually used cosmetic recipe in human history, changing throughout time and across geography to fit the needs of users and their local resources. In Roman times olive oil is used, later in Italy almond oil is popular. During the golden age of whaling, spermaceti oil was preferred. Modern versions use inorganics like mineral oil and paraffin wax.

The key ingredient giving this ancient skin treatment its name is the vinegar. It is cooling to the skin, as well as antibacterial, antimicrobial, and antifungal. The honey helps the elements stay together in a cream as well as bringing all its moisturizing and antibacterial properties to the mixture. The rosewater was considered cooling in Galenic theory, and provides moisture. The oil does the same, and the beeswax forms a barrier to seal the moisture in. A nicely formulated beauty treatment for any age.

"Take of white wax four ounces, oyl of roses omphacine a pound; melt in a double vessel, then powr it out into another, by degrees putting in cold water, and often powring it out of one vessel into another, stirring it till it be white; last of all wash it in rose water, adding a little rose water and rose vineger."

Nicholas Culpeper London Dispensatory. 1650.

"Galenus' Cold Cream- ½ oz beeswax, 2 oz olive oil, ¼ tsp white vinegar, 1 tbsp honey, 1 tsp rosewater. This recipe was used in the 2nd Century by Galenus the Physician and in the 16th Century by Alessio Piedmont." Mistress Giata Alberti, Zibaldone, 2016. Pg 13.

This redaction gives measurements that work consistently. Many historical recipes give varying instructions for how to make the cold cream, but I have found there is one way that works every time: Assemble all the ingredients in a heat safe vessel like a stainless steel measuring cup. Melt them on very low heat until they are completely amalgamated. Remove from the heat and whip like crazy until it lightens and gets a creamy consistency.

Spread a light layer on the face and remove with a hot, damp washcloth to use as a cleanser. Apply directly as a lip balm, to cool a burn, or as an ointment for scrapes. Apply with water to cool a sunburn. Apply sparingly to a damp face for moisturizer.

This information is provided for informational purposes only. It is not meant to diagnose or treat any disease.

(Make & Take: 2c Cold Cream, taught by Lady Gwlados Vachan of Trimaris mka Evan Meier at Salon di Fiesole, 5/9/20. ladygwlados@gmail.com)