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Etsy, the Makeup Counterculture

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When Tara Graff was searching for makeup that would not irritate her sensitive skin, she did not head to Sephora, Macy's or the cosmetics counter at Bloomingdale's. Instead, she turned to Etsy.com.

"I couldn't wear regular makeup," said Ms. Graff, a homemaker who, as a military spouse, divides her time between Sitka, Alaska, and Brigantine, N.J. "I was breaking out and getting itchy, so I started reading labels and getting disgusted with all the chemicals in the products." Ms. Graff said she tried mineral makeup from Bare Escentuals but found it expensive and irritating to her skin, so her mother suggested she take a look at Etsy.

Introduced in 2005, Etsy is best known as a marketplace for handmade and vintage goods, ranging from jewelry and art to sweaters. But many people don't know that the website also sells handmade cosmetics. You have to dig around for them, as makeup is categorized under the Home & Living section.

Many of the cosmetics sold on the site are organic, vegan and mineralbased and are not tested on animals. Some sellers also customize their products to buyers' taste (adding or omitting a particular ingredient, or creating a custom color) and prices can be negotiable.

"It was cool to see all these small businesses, and it's better than Amazon, because you can contact the owner and have a conversation about what is in the products," Ms. Graff said.

After sampling makeup from a few different brands on Etsy, Ms. Graff stumbled upon Erzulie, a line created by Rhonda Demars Farland and based in Swansea, Mass. Named for a goddess of love and beauty, the company sells organic, mineral and glutenfree products, ranging from foundation and lip balm to blush and cleansers.

Ms. Graff and Mrs. Demars Farland emailed multiple times to discuss Ms. Graff's skin concerns (she says she has oily skin that is very pale in the winter and almost olive in the summer) before Mrs. Demars Farland mailed her a foundation.

"She got it right the first time," said Ms. Graff, who has been using Erzulie products for two years and said they have cleared up her skin.

Brooke Marton, the owner of Firebird Bath & Body in Baltimore, Md., has been selling tinted lip balms and perfume on Etsy since 2008. She said she's sold 29,000 units since then.

"Etsy is the best thing that has ever happened to me, businesswise," Ms. Marton said. "There is a lot of help and support through Etsy, and I can connect with a community of likeminded sellers."

Some Etsy sellers expressed hope that, by selling on the site, they may attract the attention of a larger cosmetics company looking to scoop them up. But others thought it unlikely. "Independent makeup brands are very, very niche," said Virginia Lee, a senior research analyst with Euromonitor International. "Etsy could be a way to get a buyout, but it would only be the first step. Sellers need to be on a bigger platform, such as HSN or QVC."

Also, not everyone thinks that buying or selling makeup on Etsy is a great idea. There is the "ick" factor. Some people are just grossed out by the concept of buying makeup that has been made at someone's kitchen table.

"It's like what your mother told you: don't share makeup with your friends," said [Dr. Rebecca Baxt](#), assistant professor of dermatology at New York University and a dermatologist in New York and New Jersey. "You don't know where the makeup has been or how it was made. Or how clean the person's kitchen table is."



In a worstcase scenario, **Dr. Baxt** said, consumers could contract pink eye, a staph infection or contact dermatitis (effectively, a rash). “This could happen with regular makeup, too, but at least you know what is in it and how it was made,” she said.



According to a spokeswoman for the federal Food and Drug Administration, independent makeup brands must adhere to the same F.D.A. laws regarding packaging and labeling as major cosmetics companies. But actually following the law is largely a selfregulated process. And although problems are rare, they can arise.

In 2011, the Etsy cosmetics store Glittersniffer, owned by Lela Warren, based in Detroit, came under fire for using in some products pigments that were not F.D.A. approved for eyes. The makeup blogosphere was abuzz, and the Michigan attorney general’s office said it received 11 complaints regarding the company.

Ms. Warren began a voluntary recall of her products and subsequently closed her Etsy shop. In an email, she said that she is “not actively selling/ pushing Glittersniffer Cosmetics,” although a few items are for sale on her Facebook page.

Etsy declined to comment on the specifics of the Glittersniffer case but said in a written statement that sellers are meant to agree to the company’s terms of use, which include following the laws that apply to them and their shop.

“It made people question buying things on Etsy,” Ms. Marton said of the Glittersniffer case. “While it may seem weird to buy makeup from someone you don’t know, it’s no different than buying food from a stranger at a bake sale.”

As at a bake sale, the goods sold on Etsy can disappear overnight. Jackie Pfleuger of Rochester had been selling Noella Beauty, a range of organic mineralbased makeup about half the price of Jane Iredale and Bare Escentuals, on Etsy since 2010 — with better results, she said in an interview months ago, than on competitor sites like Artfire.com and Zibbet.com. “Etsy is just so well known,” she said. But a search this week for Noella Beauty on Etsy produced a dead link; a personal site, noellabeauty.com, bore an expiration notice. Calls and emails to Ms. Pfleuger went unreturned, and it seemed that those wanting to try her highcoverage foundation or eye shadow were at least temporarily out of luck.