

A conversation with Alban Muller,

CEO Alban Muller International



Alban Muller, CEO Alban Muller International

EURO COSMETICS: *You're a French family company, founded in 1978, that develops and manufactures ingredients and skin care products from plants. Tell us more about the beginnings of your company.*

Alban Muller: I was in the business of selling raw materials to the cosmetic industry and was supplying various companies with all kinds of chemically based ingredients, but also plant extracts. After a few years in the field, I came to the conclusion that my best opportunity was to specialize into Made in France plant extracts which led me to start the company. Because I had competition in France, I decided to export as much as I could, which meant I had to develop the best possible extracts to be able to conquer new demanding markets.

EURO COSMETICS: *And what visions did you have?*

Alban Muller: I indeed had a reasoning that was later considered as a vision: considering the ever expanding world population on a planet with limited resources, I decided first to focus on renewable resources; among them, the plants which fortunately

grow very well under the nice French climate. Second, I knew from my scientific studies, that these plants were a very diversified source for many different actives, from moisturizing to antioxidant, from purifying to regenerating. This opened a much larger scope than what was available at that time on the market: animal derived extracts which were soon eliminated from the market with the BSE crisis and then the HIV scare (there were placenta extracts around). Of course, we had to work hard to understand the chemistry behind them: but we knew that the whole approach had to be scientifically based. Therefore, we introduced the first TLCs chromatography equipment, then the first HPLCs for analyzing chemical composition of extracts. Then we worked for a production according to pharmaceutical GMP (thus traceability was key) to meet the stringent cosmetic industry requirements of efficacy and reproducibility. We never have been surfing on a green wave: we are the natural experts, always deepening our knowledge about truly effective and safe plant derived actives.

EURO COSMETICS: *You were a pioneer in your environmental and sustainability management. What was the idea behind this?*

Alban Muller: Consumers always want more safety which is related to a perfect traceability and transparency on our extracts; to gain access to traceable renewable plant resources, which would be easily accessible for on the spot controls, we had to develop our own local partnerships. We hence established a net of medicinal plants producers in the vicinity of our factory. Not only it helped for traceability, but it contributed to improve the global carbon balance by further reducing transportation, thus fossil fuel consumption. We create local activities while strictly conforming to the Nagoya Protocol, which is the aim of a well-thought CSR policy.

We then wanted to work on reducing the global impact on the environment of our factory. Located next to a little village, our factory's too large water consumption had to be treated into a specific public water treatment unit, which had to be built 15 km away! This meant a lot of pipes!! We introduced the concept of biodiversity gardens which evaporate this water after a first stage of treatments. 60% of the year, we don't reject any water out of the site. And when we do so, in the winter, it is a water of fish raising quality. We saw the positive impacts also on the local fauna: bees, pheasants, ducks and hares are the happy inhabitants of these biodiversity gardens around our factory. We also have switched to recyclable and natural solvents (water and alcohol from plant origin), hence increasing the biodegradability of our waste which is sent back to the fields as a fertilizing compost.





products to get the satisfaction and the confidence of their own customers.

EURO COSMETICS: *What is your innovation management of the future?*

Alban Muller: We are trying to substitute synthetic chemically based ingredients to enhance the biocompatibility and the naturalness of creams and lotions: we have successfully launched AMIGEL®, a natural gelling agent which form a solid stable gel without neutralization and stabilize natural emulsions; we have designed AMPRESERVE, the only natural preservative accepted by the European regulation, and NATURAL SALICYLIC ACID which is compliant with the US Pharmacopeia: both are natural salicylic acid from Wintergreen; we have created LIPOLAMI® ER, an active to substitute silicones, which will at the same time improve the sensory touch of emulsions or shampoos and preserve the skin barrier from dehydration. We are also working to find new actives in new plants.

EURO COSMETICS: *You have spent over 38 years doing intensive research. What was and is still your main focus?*

Alban Muller: Learn more from Nature which provides us with a very broad array of actives, provided we observe the world around us and listen humbly to people who have the knowledge. We have just scratched the surface!

EURO COSMETICS: *Explain us your “Core Ideology”.*

Alban Muller: Always perfecting what you are doing with the reduction of the negative impacts in mind. Indeed, C.S.R. is part of our commitments to drive innovation. So you always need to find new ways of doing better with less. If you don't follow this approach, your competition will do it and your customers will switch to other suppliers.

EURO COSMETICS: *Where do you get your inspiration?*

Alban Muller: By listening to many people and by observing Nature. Indeed, Nature is a source of inspiration and a model for cosmetic science for creating natural, sus-

This global improvement process is not just for “green painting”: this enables us to produce better products: our quest for reducing the impacts led us to introduce a new drying technology, zeodration, which we have perfected to gain the best possible concentrated powder of all the interesting actives of the plants, we called it zeodrate. This unique step in the process allows us to produce standardized and titrated extracts for the cosmetic and pharmaceutical industries. Indeed, Zeodration is very low energy consuming (2 times less than conventional spray-drying and 4 times less than freeze drying). We see here that trying to reduce our global impact has led us to discover new ways of making better extracts: the green economy works! This is so true that we have since devel-

oped a partnership with a Canadian company, BioForextra, which uses residues of barks from Quebec sawmills ensuring a valorization of the Boreal forest biomass for the development of actives called Borealine®. We manufacture these extracts in our factory thanks to our eco-responsible extraction and zeodration process for a complete green production cycle. Borealine® line is readily available from our sales net around the world.

This means we can also design new extracts for third parties should they wish to get the best possible extracts from their own selected raw materials.

As the President of the competitive cluster Cosmetic Valley, I led the way to establishing a charter for an eco-responsible cosmetic industry which made many companies among the 450 ones in the Cosmetic Valley look into their own processes and industrial procedures to make progresses on their side too. You need to lead the way to progress.

EURO COSMETICS: *What new challenges you face today?*

Alban Muller: For many companies in the cosmetic industry, a big focus has been made on cost savings which leads to cutting on quality. Indeed, selecting poor quality materials provided with a “green label” or a nice paper certificate is often enough. So our main challenge is to convey the message that the proof of good quality natural ingredients comes only with precise analytical certificates and traceability evidence, and that investing in good quality ingredients is the best choice for those who wish to produce performing





tainable and efficient products. Biomimeticism, such as plants strategy of defense transposed for human skin, can lead to creating natural actives with outstanding biological properties.

EURO COSMETICS: *How do you recognize trends early and implement them successfully?*

Alban Muller: Not only myself but many of my colleagues in the company do travel a lot and we learn by exchanging with our customers the world-over. We also have a good Internet watch to check “what’s up” and we discuss about new trends and ideas. I want to stress on the fact that we are not only specialized in raw materials but that since the beginning, we have been able to provide selected (and lucky of course) customers with our expertise to design and produce natural but sensorial cosmetics. By working in a creative mood with all these different marketing teams, we learn a lot about the emerging trends. Today, we create products for Europe (Scandinavia, Eastern Europe, France, UK,), the USA, China, India, Japan, ... which gives us an amazing panorama of the world cosmetic markets.

EURO COSMETICS: *You have continued to expand and recently opened an office in Los Angeles under the direction of Valerie Plotnikova. What made you decide?*

Alban Muller: Yes, and I also have created an American Alban Muller since 1999. Indeed, the USA is a very large market which now finally starts to explore the natural actives after focusing a lot on peptides and hyaluronic acid. California is certainly the part of the US which is more open to the “green ideas”; therefore we have decided to beef up our team in the US to better serve our customers. And by the way, I have met with Valerie through a customer ...

EURO COSMETICS: *Recently, you introduce yourself with a new company logo. How did it happen?*

Alban Muller: We felt the importance to have a well-designed flag to represent who we were, especially with the development of our “expertise services”. Our former logo was created when the company was only 2 years old and no real thought had been given except that we were doing something with plants. Today, we are a lot more than just that: the new logo represents the “Maison Alban Muller”, an international institution (hence the blazon) being the only of its kind to have received the status of the E.P.V. (meaning Living Heritage Company) from the French Minister of Economy; it has some plants in it of course (the flower) but also the AM initials (Alban Muller) for philosophy, a bubble for creativity, a trade-mark for exclusivity, and of course, a strong green dimension for the protection of the environment. All of our coworkers recognize themselves in this logo.

We are being more and more a partner for our customers, the expert who is called in to resolve a case, with the development of the open innovation approach, we certainly offer a one-stop shopping answer, from selecting the plant to the extraction to the formulation and up to the production. And we wanted to show in our logo that we could bring this expertise, with a “seal of approval”.

EURO COSMETICS: *What other strategic corporate goals are being pursued?*

Alban Muller: We want to expand our services for our customers as we realize that



the complexity of our trade is such that there is a need for an effective expertise rather than for “cutting-edge actives” or even “state of the art products.”

We have designed “ready to beauty” formulated products which may be put quickly onto the market as they already have their European legal file.

Our teams are also able to create new concepts, from scratch to the production and filling, even to the logistical stage. Why?

Only an experienced team of experts working for a common goal (customer satisfaction) can now resolve the horrible equation that all cosmetic companies need to resolve if they wish to survive : how to reduce the time to market when the global complexity (marketing, sales channels, technical, regulatory, ...) pushes all delays so far that the best opportunities can be missed.

To the question: “can you make it happen?” the answer is : “yes, we can !” with all the guarantees on top. ■

