

INTERIOR DESIGN



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SLEEK NEW LOOK FOR SELF-CARE

Bay Area salons and spas answer health guidelines with design

By Flora Tsapovsky

Remember when you could pop into a nail salon, get a quick manicure, then continue with your day? Remember signs in salon windows that read “Walk-ins welcome”?

The coronavirus pandemic swiftly killed that kind of casual, spontaneous self-care. First, spring shutdowns shuttered salons, leading to a surge in clipper sales and undoubtedly thousands of ill-advised home haircuts. Then, as restrictions relaxed, spas and salons returned in creative outdoor incarnations. Finally in the fall, customers were allowed back inside a few at a time, with clients receiving facials under plexiglass shields and regular temperature and oxygen-level checks for the staff. Until the next shutdown, that is.

Now, after a month-long closure, salons are allowed to reopen again, as Gov. Gavin Newsom lifted the statewide stay-at-home order Jan. 25. But spas and salons are opening their doors differently than they did a year ago. Spaces have been redesigned to meet distancing requirements, new safety precautions are in effect and walk-ins have been largely eliminated. In the COVID-era, a pedicure, haircut, facial or massage requires careful planning, and a visit to the salon is a special treat. In the Bay Area, a crop of new beauty businesses is redefining how local salons look and feel in ways that seem tailor-made for the moment.

When GoodBody salon opened in Uptown Oakland in October, its striking design stood out immediately: the curvy millwork pedestals, the arched entryways, the cream and green color palette. Owner Brittany Barnes wanted to create a space dedicated to Black hair that felt modern and luxurious, and she succeeded.

“With GoodBody, we’re positioning textured and Black hair care as self-care,” Barnes told The Chronicle. “I want it to not just feel like a place where you’re getting your hair done, but a place where you’re like, ‘Oh yeah, I could be here for a few hours and feel really good about it.’”

Also in Oakland, nail salon Saunders & James opened in January 2020 only to close temporarily a couple of months later with the first pandemic shutdown. Owner Michelle Saunders, who previously worked as a manicurist in Hollywood, envisioned a destination salon with a different ambiance than the typical mani-pedi spot. “Instead of using the nail salon



Monastery



Courtesy Saunders & James



Saunders & James

Brittany Barnes, top, opened her modern GoodBody salon in Oakland with the idea that caring for Black hair is a form of self-care. Monastery in Noe Valley, center, is designed to put to rest any pandemic “ambivalence” about being indoors, says interior designer Jacqueline Sullivan. Michelle Saunders, above left, wanted Saunders & James nail salon in Oakland, above right, to look a bit like someone’s living room — with foot sinks.

as a template, I used the materials you’d see in a home,” she says. Warmer tones, wooden stools, woven wall hangings, shades of deep green and gray make Saunders & James feel like someone’s living room, only with foot sinks.

As the salon has opened and closed over the past year in accordance with state and local orders, Saunders says about half the clientele comes from beyond the immediate area, traveling from all corners of the Bay Area drawn by the aesthetic and the service. “A manicure used to be part of your errands,” Saunders says. “Now, you wake up in the morning and have to really rethink your routines. Scheduling an appointment to do nails is now much more intentional.”

With the coronavirus pandemic, “there’s a little ambivalence about going inside, so the sense of a space being bespoke is important,” says interior designer Jacqueline Sullivan, who worked on new skin care studio Monastery in Noe Valley. Upon walking in, customers are transported to Greece, where owner Athena Hewett’s father grew up. There are curved stucco walls, glossy floors, an enormous mint green table commissioned from the Los Angeles brand Waka Waka and mementos from Greece, courtesy of Hewett’s grandmother.

“My previous studio down the street had a different feel, much more cottage-like,” says Hewett. In the new location, everything — from the projections of travel footage on an empty

wall to the curved rattan hangers in the treatment rooms — is very island chic.

While a dose of escapism has always been part of the fun of self-care, in these new businesses it is playing a larger role than ever. That means not only deliberate and bold aesthetic choices, but also spaciousness to allow for natural distancing, surfaces that look pristine and easy to clean and, in the case of a new spa at the Rush Creek Lodge near Yosemite, more outdoor options.

With outdoor heated floors, lounging areas, a hot tub and rock beds you can lay in, the spa “feels like it’s totally matching the current environment,” says designer Anthony Laurino. Laurino started working on the project prior to the pandemic and had to adapt to the realities of the coronavirus. “We discussed how we can make people feel comfortable and confident in the space,” he says, adding that clients are looking for pandemic-friendly touches like attractive dividers between customers and harder finishes instead of carpets.

The rise of the atmospheric salon that offers a stylish, serene environment to match the services goes well beyond the Bay Area. In New York City, there’s a COVID-era salon, made for social distancing. In Los Angeles, meticulously designed massage parlors and facial boutiques like the Now and Heyday, have been trendy for a couple of years. In the Bay Area, interior designer Hannah Collins of San Francisco firm Roy says this year has created demand for “spaces that feel potentially more gender-neutral, almost residential, with new levels of comfort and cleanliness.”

The nature of services is shifting as well. At Rush Creek Lodge, families and friend groups can book the spa for a private visit, using the facilities without interruption for \$1,200 for 2.5 hours, with up to 15 people present. Teri Marshall, director of marketing at the lodge, says the option is extremely popular. At Saunders & James, Saunders says that new services like a no-polish manicure introduced during the pandemic are gaining popularity, and at Monastery, there’s even a virtual offering — a Zoom session with an aesthetician giving instructions for a self-administered facial.

But, for the most part, “people are just excited to be touched again, and hopefully, they’re also enjoying the vibe,” says Monastery’s Hewett. In the past, that vibe might have meant a stack of glossy magazines and mingling over sparkling water or wine in the waiting area. Now, it’s all about admiring design details that look safely stylish as you enjoy self-care at a comfortable distance.

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