

Chaga grows mainstream following

BY ANTHONY BRINO
BDN STAFF

Rene Guay, one of Maine's first chaga sellers, discovered the birch tree-based fungus kind of by accident.

In 2010, a Canadian customer buying birch bark from his western Maine Spirit of the Woods business asked if Guay carried chaga, a hard, charcoal-colored fungus that grows mostly on birch trees as a parasite over the course of more than a decade.

"I said, 'What the heck is chaga?'" Guay recalled. It turns out he came across chaga, whose inside is reddish brown, all the time as a logger based in Dennistown, west of Moosehead Lake, among the hundreds of other fungi he saw in the woods. He didn't know chaga had been used as a nutrient-rich tea and medicine among Siberians, Micmacs and other northern people around the world or that it was about to

go mainstream.

Six years later, Guay is a regular drinker of chaga tea, crediting it as an immune system booster, preventing what used to be annual bouts of bronchitis and colds, an anecdote similar to those of other chaga purveyors.

While some Maine farmers, foragers and loggers sell chaga at local outdoor markets and stores, Guay has turned it into a relatively big business with his 5-year-old company, Chaga Mountain. The company sells chaga chunks and teas, as well as lip balms, skin salves and concentrated extracts, online and in stores. He wouldn't reveal his annual sales figures but said he's in the process of getting a distribution deal to sell at 400 grocery stores in Canada.

Chaga (*Inonotus obliquus*) is pitched as mellow, slightly nutty-tasting good-for-you drink from the forest, though it remains partly in the gray areas of folk medicine and incomplete science.

Last February, Chaga Mountain was given a warning by the Food and Drug Administration and ordered to remove information on its website about chaga's supposed health properties, which the agency said constituted unsupported medical claims. Chaga Mountain's website now has less information and encourages visitors to do their own research. But Guay said much of the information was from a credible source: the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York.

Researchers with the center have maintained a clearinghouse of the most up-to-date studies of chaga, and they note there are areas of promise.

Lab and animal studies have shown that compounds found in chaga, such as betulinic acid, can kill cancer cells, stimulate the immune system and lower blood sugar, according to the researchers. Among other things, chaga is thought to be a significant source



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A young chaga growing on a birch tree in Presque Isle's Mantle Lake Park.

of selenium, an essential mineral that helps the body control cancer cells.

But, Memorial Sloan Kettering researchers emphasize, "clinical

trials are needed to confirm chaga's safety and effectiveness for these uses." Their page also warns that chaga is high in oxalate. *See Chaga, Page C2*



KATHLEEN PIERCE | BDN

Alanna York stands with her line of hair products in her Head Games Salon in Portland. The Use Me line of products is being phased out and focus placed on her popular curl creme called Controlled Chaos.

'Chaos' pays off for Maine business

Entrepreneur says 'Shark Tank' helped save her product line

BY KATHLEEN PIERCE
BDN STAFF

PORTLAND — "When I was 12 I was made fun of all the time because my hair was poofy like crazy," said Alanna York, 42, a bouncy brunette with enviable curls.

As the Windham native got older, attended cosmetology school and opened a salon in downtown Portland, she developed a product to tame curly and wavy hair.

"There is no such thing as frizz. It drives me nuts. I can fix all of that with this one product," said York, owner of Head Games Salon for Hair & Body at 116 Free St.

On an episode of ABC's reality series "Shark Tank," which aired Jan. 8, York pitched that product, a curl creme called Controlled Chaos. Much to her surprise, a bidding war ensued.

Lori Greiner, known as the "Queen of QVC," is now a majority partner in the Maine-based business. York and co-owner Erica Gray of Scarborough have each maintained a 25 percent share.

"I was not hoping to give away that much. I was happy to get a bidding war between three of them and have Mr. Wonderful actually be wonderful; he was a complete sweetheart," recounted York of Canadian investor Kevin O'Leary, one of the "Sharks" that appears on the show. "The other two men were a bit grumpy that day."

York had QVC on her mind and jumped when Greiner entered the fray and made an offer.

"It was the only offer I could consider," she said.

Though she pitched her product to the "Shark Tank" cast in September, all fall and into the holidays, negotiations continued



A bottle of Controlled Chaos Curl Creme, formerly called Use Me Curl Creme. Invented by Portland salon owner Alanna York, the hair product was pitched on an episode of "Shark Tank."

to hammer out details. She wasn't sure when the episode would air and when her rebrand would kick in.

Recovering from abdominal surgery in December, York got the call and sprang into action.

"I had two weeks to reinvent the entire website," said the Fal-mouth resident.

The product, formerly called Use Me, will be available in seven weeks. On the market since 2012, her line of style cremes was well received, but the company was floundering. Stumbling blocks stood in the way of Use Me's growth.

A huge order from a network *See Chaos, Page C2*



When to buy an extended warranty

BY RUSS VAN ARSDALE
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR NORTHEAST CONTACT

Consumers who do their research may conclude that buying an extended warranty is not generally worth the cost.

CONSUMER FORUM

On major appliances, the manufacturer's warranty covers the period of initial use, when minor problems generally surface. More serious problems likely will arise after an extended warranty period is over, so the cost of coverage may not be justified.

However, for some really big purchases, extended warranties may be worth a second look. Look carefully because many consumers have found that some extended warranties were bad investments. Third-party coverage for vehicle repair is notorious for refusing to pay because the problem in question is "not covered."

For private homes, purchasing a warranty might make sense. In many states, homebuilders have to provide a warranty on new homes they build. An extended warranty is different from home insurance, which covers your loss in case of natural or manmade disasters. Owners of existing homes can buy warranties that cover heating and cooling apparatus, plumbing and electrical systems and appliances.

A home warranty likely will cost between \$350 and \$500 and typically is paid annually. The cost will depend on what you want covered — for example, appliances only, systems only or both. There typically are fees for every service call, running \$75 to \$100. You should ask up front whether you'll be charged a fee each time if more than one service call is needed to resolve a problem.

Another question to ask a warranty provider is whether service providers are licensed. The company may allow you to use a provider of your choice, but most use *See Forum, Page C2*



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