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Hour of Knead

With the boutique exercise industry in overdrive, a group of unrelenting massage therapists promises another route to a well-sculpted body. Marisa Meltzer goes deep.

LOOK AT THE DIFFERENCE IN YOUR LEGS," IRANI DOMINO says with more than a hint of pride during my visit to her cozy Manhattan studio last fall. I peer down at my left thigh, which has been slathered with a homemade magnesium scrub to open my pores for optimal sweating, then wrapped in an infrared sauna blanket, and finally finished with a half-hour of manual kneading. There's newfound definition, as if I had just gone running. The Brazilian-born aesthetician performs a few more elongated strokes in an upward motion toward the lymph nodes in my groin, bringing me one step closer toward achieving my objective for the evening: to massage my way to a better body.

It's a pipe dream for someone who has speed-dated her way through punishing spin classes, the dance-cardio phenomenon, and daybreak yoga raves, although the practice is fairly common

that a cadre of in-the-know models and celebrities is exchanging the names of cult body sculptors whose techniques often venture so deep, they can leave a constellation of black-and-blue marks.

As I hobble out of Domino's atelier, a toned Padma Lakshmi walks in.

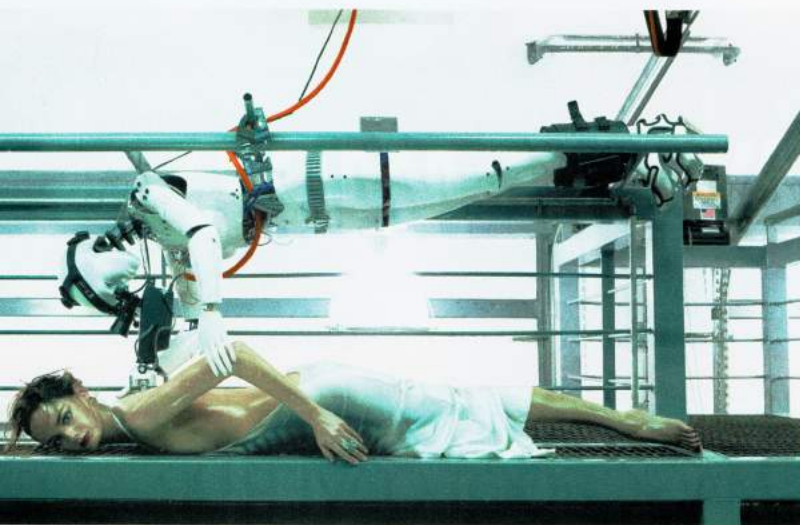
The appeal of this specific kind of pain endurance is one part aspirational—achieve Michelle Obama's arm definition while simply lying on a massage bed!—and one part biological. "Cells are like little factories that make things and produce waste, called lymph," explains Anna Zahn, a lymphatic-detox specialist who owns Ricari Studios in Los Angeles, where Moon Juice founder Amanda Chantal Bacon and model Langley Fox book regular body- and face-defining sessions. "Lymph lives between the skin and the fascia—the body's connective tissue—and it can stagnate there when the fascia becomes tight and poorly stimulated," continues Zahn. This can occur from things as mundane as dehydration and stress, causing pain, poor blood flow, puffiness, and even cellulite. Loosening the fascia with massage—or the endermologie Cellu M6 Integral 2 machine, an FDA-approved device made in France and originally designed to treat burns and edema, which Zahn uses to suck and roll the skin—is believed to decrease inflammation while sculpting limbs.

The promise of minimal-exertion tone has sparked a frenzy for at-home devices that resemble instruments of torture, such as the FasciaBlaster (trainer Ashley Black's pronged club that rolls over your limbs) or the vibrating Sun Ancon Chi Machine from Japan. But neither is a match for Martine de Richeville's Remodelage technique, which will find a permanent home at Saks Fifth Avenue's renovated beauty floor when it opens in New York this May. De Richeville, who has commuted to Manhattan from Paris for the past few years to see loyal clients, performs a massage that lifts and pinches your skin. For 60 minutes straight.

If done frequently, the technique can take inches off your waist, she insists. "I suggest coming biweekly to get rid of the main blockages, and then twice a month or every few weeks to increase the cumulative effects. People get addicted, though," she says, rattling off a list of longtime clients, including Sofia Coppola. "They feel better and move better, and they want to come as much as possible."

But can lymphatic or fascial massage actually replace simply moving better and more often? "Both treatments can be hugely helpful to those who are fit and healthy, and those who are recovering from surgeries," says Adie MacKenzie, a Nashville-based massage therapist and licensed physical-therapy assistant who sits on the board of the Lymphology Association of North America (LANA). Aside from its purported tightening abilities, MacKenzie points out, lymphatic massage has become popular after cosmetic procedures, such as facelifts, breast reconstruction, and liposuction, as well as orthopedic

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TRAINING MANUAL

BODY-FASCIAL MASSAGE STIMULATES LYMPHATIC DRAINAGE, CLEARING OUT UNWANTED BLOAT FOR LONGER, LEANER LIMBS. BUT AS WITH A WORKOUT: NO PAIN, NO GAIN. PHOTOGRAPHED BY STEVEN KLEIN, VOGUE, 2006.

in South America and parts of Europe. There, lymphatic-drainage body-fascial massage is a tried-and-true way to keep limbs lithe, lean, and cellulite-free without spending hours at the gym. The centuries-old technique has been slower to catch on Stateside, as our cardio obsession, together with a feel-the-burn mind-set, has long kept 24 Hour Fitness chains in business. But that's beginning to change with the arrival of a kinder attitude about how to best care for our bodies and engineer results—going beyond heart-rate measurements to connect such factors as diet, mindfulness, and now bodywork to the way we stay physically fit. It doesn't hurt

surgeries. But she points out that along with an increased interest in these modalities comes the risk of providers' offering to treat serious lymphatic conditions without adequate diagnosis or training. "Seeking out a certified lymphedema therapist (CLT-LANA) would, in my opinion, assure the most confidence that you are receiving skilled care," she says. (LANA has a directory of certified therapists on its website, clt-lana.org.)

There's also the issue of involuntarily promoting a sedentary lifestyle. "Massage is not a substitute for exercise," says Robin Berzin, M.D., CEO, and founder of the functional-medicine practice Parsley Health, with locations in New York, L.A., and San Francisco. "If you are trying to heal swelling, there is benefit, but we should all be stimulating the lymph with movement: running, jumping, or stretching." (De Richeville does recommend walking, in tandem with her treatments.)

There is no mention of even light exercise in my hour-long rubdown with Marina Baratashvili, easily the most painful beauty treatment I have ever submitted to. A gentle woman with unbelievably strong hands, Baratashvili combines Chinese acupressure with the sports-medicine and physical-therapy background she honed during ten years as a trainer for the Georgian National Ballet. As

a distraction, I try to focus on the mental image of a principal dancer's swelle calf muscles as she leaps through the second act of *Giselle*. But I am in such extreme discomfort, I am making loud, involuntary moaning sounds. "I'm sorry, sweetie," Baratashvili says with a thick Tbilisi accent, yet she continues to dig her elbows and fingers into my muscles. I emerge bruised and wonder if body-fascial massage is actually any easier than my regularly scheduled boot-camp class.

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Vanessa Traina thinks it is. "It is not pleasure massage," the stylist and owner of the Line boutique tells me with a laugh. Traina has been seeing Baratashvili since she gave birth to her son, Louis, one year ago; now her sister Victoria and her husband, the jewelry designer Charlie de Viel Castel, have been receiving bodywork and facials from the aesthetician. "She is a healer, in a way," says Traina—and maybe something of a miracle worker, too. The day after I see Baratashvili, my arms and legs are so drained of blood that a Dries Van Noten blouse that I could once barely button is comfortably loose over my stomach. I've also lost three pounds of water weight. I might not be ready to give up my gym membership, but for now, you can count me among the converted. I immediately book another session with her, straight after a yoga class. □