

A MODEL BREEDING GROUND: FLORIDA 'RECIPE' OR JUST LUCKY IN LOOKS?

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DATE: October 5, 1992

PUBLICATION: The Palm Beach Post

EDITION: FINAL

SECTION: ACCENT

PAGE: 1D

You'd think good looks were in the water down here.

In case you've been on the lam and haven't noticed, more and more South Florida teens keep popping up on magazine covers and TV shows.

There's Broward County's Niki Taylor who, via Seventeen, embarked on a still-thriving caviar dream of fashion shoots and runway spins three years ago.

Seventeen magazine, in fact, has launched the careers of many Sunshine State pretties. Last September, Shakari Darsey of Palm City graced several pages. Then Jupiter's Kristin Klosterman showed up on the May cover. And three months later, Jennifer Wacha of Jensen Beach was featured in a "Surfer Girl" spread and is scheduled to appear in December, too.

Meanwhile, Lake Worth model Ingvar Estrada-- who already has appeared in Miami Vice, B.L. Stryker and several movies-- moved Big Appleward last month in a full-blown quest for fame.

The wise must ponder: Is it something in our soil?

"No, she just lucked out," said Klosterman's mom, Jean, of her 5-foot-10, green-eyed daughter. "I wish I could say it's in our family recipe. You know, a beauty secret."

Mom Janice Wacha thinks it's the climate. "I think it's because the kids have a lot of fresh air and sunshine all year long. They have such beautiful skin. . . ."

That skin (not too tanned, mind you-- just glowing) is only one of numerous items on Donna Rubinstein's checklist. As Seventeen's model editor, she decides who becomes whom among thousands of hopefuls.

"Easy smile, great skin, nice hair, great personality, sense of humor," she rattles off.

But even more important, says New York-based Rubinstein, is a well-rounded background.

"The girls that live down there live with their families. They don't uproot themselves and come to New York. It's better because they stay in school, grow up and model on the side."

And this lifestyle, she said, creates personality, confidence and intelligence-- vital traits to a successful modeling career.

Rubinstein spotted Taylor, 17, ("she's still shy and still a kid," the editor says with praise) while viewing photos from Irene Marie agency, a Miami Beach-based talent finder for 15 years.

"It's not a South Florida look," said founder Marie of what sells in the fickle fashion domain.

"It's really a very high-caliber international look. (Florida teens) are of the quality to be able to work in New York, Paris and anywhere in the world.

"What makes South Florida incredible is there are a lot of beautiful girls here."

Think your kid could be one of them? Marie suggests an investment-- a \$2.50 roll of film.

"The best thing to do is send in pictures. Just a snapshot. Don't spend a lot of money."

Estrada, 25-- pictures in hand-- is pounding on agency doors in New York even as you read this. (Note: "The men's market is different on the age level," Marie said. "They really come into the money in their late 20s.")

"He's found so much to do, he's not coming back!" said his mom, Carin, who reveals that Estrada practices his singing in elevators. Now there's an idea for you shower-bound crooners.

He dances, too. And acts. And has appeared in numerous Florida fashion shows. Heck, this guy was even in Police Academy V.

"You have to be versatile," his mom says matter-of-factly. We believe her.

But perhaps more important, you have to market yourself (this is tough) or be promoted by a respected agency, experts advise.

"We have the business in Miami," Marie says. "We've become recognized. We have clients from all over the world shooting here. Not in New York, not in Paris, not in Milan. Here."

Florida. A birthplace of beauty indeed.

Take Wacha, 15. She's working for a French catalog in Miami and waiting to hear about a commercial audition she had last week. Klosterman, also 15, has been "put on hold" until next month because of school, her mom said.

Taylor, a high school senior, is concentrating on her studies, too, an Irene Marie spokeswoman said. ("Getting an interview with Niki is basically impossible." Yeah, we knew that.)

So the Florida chemistry seems to be hearth, home and access to someone who knows how to hype you just so.

Of course, if you're under 16, you'll need a mom or dad to whisk you around to all those agency "go-sees" (a.k.a. "cattle calls").

"I hope she has good luck," joked Jean Klosterman about daughter, Kristin, "so I can retire."