

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Ramya Viswanathan

JVN [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness and every week I sit down for a gorgeous conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. On today's episode, I'm joined by Ramya Viswanathan, where I ask her: What's chemistry got to do with haircare? Welcome to Getting Curious, this is Jonathan Van Ness, I'm so excited to welcome someone who I've known for a few years now, someone I've gotten really close to, who I just respect so much we love. Welcome to the show Ramya Viswanathan. How are you doing, Ramya?

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:00:31] Doing well, thank you for having me.

JVN [00:00:33] OK, so just to set you guys the scene, so you can picture it, we are in this, like, white little office room in San Francisco. We are having our, our first in-person meeting in what feels like twenty seven years, but I think it was more like 18 months or something. And Ramya is the chemist and main lead principal formulator of JVN Hair, and also Biossance. What's your, like, official gorgeous title for Biossance?

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:01:00] Director of product development.

JVN [00:01:01] You really have been, like, in the lead of helping us develop everything. Everything. I really, I think I have in my career. I've really loved learning about ingredients. I love learning about where ingredients come from. But really what I've learned about, like, function of ingredients, I've really learned from you. I feel like I've learned so much. OK, I have a question. How does skincare and haircare actually work. So skin is like living. It's like it is a live organism. Our hair is dead cells.

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:01:34] Yeah.

JVN [00:01:35] So your hair is already dead, your skin is currently alive. So how does our hair and skin take on products differently? And as a formulator and as a chemist, what do you need to do generally to, like, what does skin need? What does hair need?

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:01:50] So I think of the structure of skin. Skin is very hydrophilic, so it's very water loving, it's very water loving. So it loves a good moisturizer. So you need to be able to introduce elements of water as well as oils to kind of seal everything in just so that your skin feels happy and it needs to be very nourished. Hair is interesting because it is dead, yet you can see an impact from the products you use. And a lot of times I like to really start with the root of how you're washing your hair because you want to be mindful of the ingredients you're using and also have a good experience. So

there's this blend of cleaning or just cleansing and conditioning. Just so hair you could still manipulate here in a way that it feels it's best.

JVN [00:02:33] So I learned in school that our hair is really similar to fabric, and if you were to like, look at them under microscopes, like, they all look kind of similar. Is that true?

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:02:42] That's true.

JVN [00:02:43] Because we didn't end up, we didn't have a microscope there, so we didn't really look. So what are some of the-, so and then you said something really interesting, which is that even though it's dead, there is, like, it does have physical impact from what we do to it, both good and bad, because I mean, I've seen, like, hair get bleached with an inch of its life. I've seen hair get really upset sometimes. So how, how does that work as a texture, like, as a thing. How does hair get, like, healthy or if it's data?

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:03:09] There are a whole bunch of different ways that sometimes I think of hair porosity and the kind of products you want to use. When hair is more porous, you can always introduce things like proteins or what we have is the baseline for upcoming JVN Hair is we're using hemisqualene as a base ingredient, which is another ingredient that our company develops, which is similar to squalene, but it's half a squalene, basically. So it's a lighter weight version. So it's something that runs through hair, moisturizes hair and penetrates the hair shaft that there is a visible different, difference from using it. And it's also really lightweight. So it doesn't feel heavy, like, you know, a heavy oil. So you want something that's not going to weigh hair down but also has some sort of a benefit.

JVN [00:03:58] Well, just really quick. I feel like a lot of people may not know the squalene story. So I'm curious to hear it from you. What is squalene, first of all. Just, what is squalene?

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:04:10] Squalene is an emollient that's very commonly used in skincare. It's very similar in structure to something that our own skin has called squalene that our bodies naturally produce. That kind of gives skin some of its resiliency and malignancy and just its overall, uh, barrier. It helps support the skin barrier. So as, as we age, it's levels kind of change. And oftentimes to replenish brands were using squalene as an emollient in skincare products and a lot of luxury creams, oils as this ingredient that skin already recognizes.

JVN [00:04:55] OK, and so was, and so, pre this version of squalene, it really was from literal sharks or olives.

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:05:03] Yes.

JVN [00:05:03] And was it nice? Did it work? Was it, like, was it gross? Did we love it? Do we hate it?

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:05:08] It was really nice, and it does work. But then when you think about the sustainability story of it, it's not always the most favored.

JVN [00:05:15] So and that's because, like, on average, there was, like, a couple millions of sharks a year that were. And the reason why olive is kind of, like, well, because olive is just, like, it may be a little unstable if the crop doesn't work that year or if it's, like-. So, so, how did, how did this version of squalene get created? Like, what actually happens to the sugarcane to make squalene?

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:05:35] So what we use is the fermentation process with sugarcane as a feeding material to create our version of squalene, which has the same purity as shark squalene. And there's a much more steady supply because we grow our sugarcane in Brazil. It grows very readily. And it's all supported by rainfall. So, it's very sustainable and it's just, and we can have consistent supply and there haven't been any concerns with it.

JVN [00:06:06] So, porosity. I remember porosity being explained to me as, like, if you think of, like, each hair as, like, a sponge and it's, like, how many holes on the sponge there is. Would you say that that's, like, an accurate description? Like, it's, like, how much water it holds on to, like, how dry it is?

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:06:21] Yeah, or product, and I've seen that. Have you tried the hair porosity test where you cut your hair, cut a piece of hair, put it into water, and if it sinks, it's really porous. If it's slow. Basically, it's how absorptive it could be.

JVN [00:06:32] Yes, yes, yes! So, OK, I love that story. So porosity is, like, how much water retention, like, how dry the hair is, then elasticity is, like, how much your hair stretches. And that's kind of how we think about strength. Right?

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:06:47] Right.

JVN [00:06:48] And so if you, if your hair is wet and you look at it and you stretch it while it's wet, how much your hair stretches is, like, how much, like, elasticity is, well, elasticity is

how much it springs back. Yeah. And you want good elasticity, right. Because you don't want your hair to stretch and then break right off.

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:07:04] Correct. So, think of, like, pasta. I've seen when you cook pasta versus dry pasta. If it's, like, if it's too strong without that hydration, it's going to break off. So I, I've seen that example used. Yeah. That's a good way to describe how hair works.

JVN [00:07:20] OK, I love that example. Our line, we've really focused on universality, on inclusivity. We really want our products to work on so many different hair types. So, which is a difficult needle to thread because everyone has such different hair. I think that's why we've really been so mindful to think about our lines the way that we've thought about our lines with Nuture being a really hydrating line and with Undamaged being a really, like, protective, strengthening line and then Embody being, like, what is in my opinion, like, not to brag about our baby, but I do feel like Embody is my ultimate favorite thickening line of all time ever. I've never-, or volumizing, rather. I've never used a volumizing shampoo that didn't turn my hair into a full-out Brillo pad, like, every volumizing shampoo and conditioner I've ever used, like, made me regret it because it, like, dried my hair. I couldn't, like, brush. It just was, like, a fucking mess. And ours just makes your hair, like, feel thicker, more manageable, fuller, but also, like, hydrated at the same time. So what are some ingredients that we have at our disposal that we can use to make hair more hydrated or stronger or feel more full or thick?

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:08:32] I'm going to start with the hemisqualene because that one does it all. It moisturizes hair without weighing it down. And that's so important and that's why it works in so many different hair types. It's really interesting, I remember when I was learning how to make conditioners way back when, the rule is to not put heavy oils in it. So oftentimes there are certain emollients that can be used, but you don't know how well they work or they're not always friendly once they go down the drain.

JVN [00:09:01] Why?

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:09:02] Because they accumulate and are not always good for aquatic life. So we have to be conscious of what we're using.

JVN [00:09:09] What are some oils that do that, tell us?

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:09:11] Well, sometimes volatile silicones can be offenders.

JVN [00:09:14] So those are, like, what they call the bioaccumulatives. So that's, like, just, like, just, like, heavy, certain, just certain silicones. Yes, but not all silicones.

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:09:25] Not all. In Europe you're not supposed to use volatile silicones in rinse-off products anymore just because of the environmental concerns. They feel nice, they have an impact. They coat hair, they don't actually-

JVN [00:09:35] Penetrate. Interest. Does hemisqualene penetrate?

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:09:38] Yes.

JVN [00:09:38] So how do we tell that? Do we look at it under a microscope, like, after we, like, put it in? Like, how do we tell that it penetrated?

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:09:43] So we've done some strand studies in our early days of developing hemisqualene to show how it functions and all of the benefits that it has. And in finding that we were able to see how well it works as a haircare ingredient and that's why we started using it.

JVN [00:09:59] What were some of the benefits of it?

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:10:01] It offers heat protection, helps with color retention, it conditions hair, helps with frizz, all while still detangling hair and not making it feel heavy. And you felt it earlier today?

JVN [00:10:15] I did.

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:10:16] So if you were to compare it to say, like, you know, olive oil or something like that, how would you-

JVN [00:10:21] Way lighter, way lighter than an olive oil and also more quickly absorbed than an olive oil for sure. So you've got hemisqualene and that can make our hair more moisturized. What, what, what do you do if you want to make hair feel thicker.

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:10:36] In the Embody collection, we utilize biotin, we use caffeine, we have a bamboo extract in the conditioner that helps hair swell a little bit, so that's helping, and then all of this, you know, it is enhanced by the by hemisqualene. Plus, we didn't use any heavy waxes, just to help hair feel more voluminous.

JVN [00:10:57] So, because, in that we kind of attack a, like, "right now" with the bamboo, but then, like, a long term with some. So there's like giving you a little bit of, like, cheese on your broccoli right now, which is the bamboo, but then some, like, long term ingredients to, like, set you up for more success in the long run. Cute, I love that. So then what about for strength?

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:11:16] For strength in the Undamaged collection we're using a lot of protein. So one of the products used is a charged lemon protein, which if you think about it, hair is negatively charged so we want to make it more positive. So we put charged, positively charged proteins in it.

JVN [00:11:33] OK, I have a question, though! So, OK, let's say my hair is just, like, lacking some-, or it's, like, it's got, like, I'm just stretchy, I'm weak. I maybe did, like, a nasty bleach and tone that got overlap. So I thought it was two yellow. Then I put bleach, like, twelve more times on it. I'm all-, my curls are all fucked up. I got, like, twenty seven million textures going on. How does the protein in the conditioner and shampoo, like, actually make my hair feel stronger. Like, what's happening.

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:11:59] Part of it is just the structure of the ingredients and they're allowing better delivery into the hair. And if you think about things like the proteins we're using or even the conditions that are in it, a lot of it is very charged based. So that's why you actually feel an impact because of how hair takes it in.

JVN [00:12:20] So what does, like, weakened or damaged hair, like, that-, it just gets, like, more negatively charged than, like, it was beforehand?

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:12:30] It's more porous. So that's one part of it. And it starts to, you'll see little if you were to look at it under a microscope, it looks a little like, kind of broken. So you want to be able to just replenish it and smooth it out.

JVN [00:12:46] So can you take, like, if you think about, like, one hair shaft as, like, a tree trunk, like, do you ever start to see that crack start to, like, go across, and then does the protein actually, like, resmooth it or, like, rebond it together.

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:12:59] Yeah.

JVN [00:12:59] And is that, like, a permanent thing or do you need to keep using, like-, so is that how conditioners work long term is they just kind of, like, fill in the cracks of the-

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:13:09] So conditioners work via their charge. The conditioners are usually cationic as well. And we talked about hair being-, cationic is positively charged and we talked about hair being negatively charged, so that, that's how conditioners work. And the Undamaged collection on top of that uses proteins to sort of infuse it into hair. And it shows a pretty visible benefit. And then we balance that out with the right amount of moisture because we want to make sure we have that, too. And we're not just speaking to protein.

JVN [00:13:40] And then I think for me, like, I first kind of started getting into the idea of, like, sustainability, like, fair trade, what clean beauty means, all from, like, my encounters with Aveda as, like, as a teenager, my mom went to the Aveda store in St. Louis and she was like, "Got to use this shammy." And they're, like, all in glass bottles because if it wasn't in glass, it would, like, X, Y, Z. And there was, like, this, this whole kind of idea. And I ended up going to the beauty school at the Aveda Institute in Minneapolis. And I think, you know, that was in 2005. I started, I finished in 2006. But I very much feel like if you would have told me in 2006, like, the word "synthetic," like, definitely didn't ring as, like, it didn't feel like a good word for beauty.

But it's weird because then as a hairdresser, I've often thought, like, well, a lot of products that were too organic and, like, too, too natyry. Like, I felt like it was a little goopy, maybe didn't work, but then it was too sciencey, like, it just felt like it was making the hair almost feel kind of plastic, maybe a little build-up-y, like, almost, like, a residual, like, tackiness to the hair that you don't or, like, almost like a chlorinated, like, slip as well. Too much of a slip. Right. And so synthetic is something that historically, like, I would have when it comes to haircare. I was like, "OK, maybe you need a little bit of science." But then I realized that sometimes, even if it's amazing and if it comes from the Earth, if it's organic, and it's fair trade, sometimes we do have, like, a finite amount of something, like, squalene would be an example of this. And that's, like, poor baby sharks. So, we don't wanna be, like, killing all the sharks. But if you think about like, you know, like, a vanilla bean or something, like, there are finite amounts of, like, or a certain rose or just...

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:15:24] Sandalwood! All the Maistre sandalwood trees are gone for the next, you know, more than a decade just because we've depleted all the natural resources.

JVN [00:15:33] So then that's what-, sandalwood is, like, often used in skincare, haircare. You know, there's like a sandalwood hairspray I used to, like, be obsessed with. There was, like, sandalwood in it. So synthetic means... what.

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:15:48] Synthetic means you've, you've, it's been made, it's something that's been made.

JVN [00:15:56] In its simplest term. Love that.

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:15:02] And it's really interesting because I feel like it always sometimes can have a little bit of a negative association. But if you think about skincare or haircare. We're not pulling stuff out of the ground to put it into products, it always requires some kind of a process just to make it suitable for skin, hair. So there's certain processes involved there.

JVN [00:16:21] What does testing look like, because, oh gosh, over, like, I keep kicking the thing under the table, y'all don't worry, but we've formulated, like, we're, we've, like, changed lots of formulas in our products. We've changed, like, consistencies since, like, what's, like, the scientific aspect of testing look like?

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:16:39] So once we signed off all the formulas, we, when we'd worked on that together, we want, we usually send it out to a third-party testing lab where we're doing a mix of analytical testing, as well as just consumer preference, because we obviously want real people using everything. But the analytical testing is really critical. So for some of the tests, like, in the Nurture moisturization collection, we're focusing a lot on almost treating hair just to really extreme conditions to make sure that it holds up. Like, you'll put high heat to make sure some of the products are heat protective, you can shine UV on it to see how color safe products are. You can do tensile strength tests to see how stretchy hair is. So there's cool test points for all of these. There's one where you subject heat to four hundred and fifty degrees to make sure that the product protects hair. So that's what we're doing for the instant recovery serum.

JVN [00:17:44] Love. OK, I'm obsessed with that story. I am really curious about how you came into this career. And I think there's a lot of young people who are listening to this, or maybe even not young people, just people listening to this who would be really fascinated. Maybe they could chase it down, too. So tell me about when you started creating formulas and products.

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:18:06] So I, going back, I studied molecular biology and chemistry, and I stumbled across just product, cosmetic chemistry formulations as a career path. I was kind of, like, looking at what I can do that blends creativity with curiosity with, with science. And this just seemed like the perfect space to be in. One of the first roles that I did out, of out of university was working as a formulation chemist for a bunch of brands. I wrote thousands of formulas for hundreds of brands and spent quite a bit of time along

that. I made every single type of product you can think of, and it was really fun, and it was just very interesting. I got, I got a good, a really good exposure to ingredients, understanding how they work, understanding how to make product. And after spending some time to that, I learned about Biossance. I was very familiar with the, the story behind Biossance. And I was introduced to the company.

JVN [00:19:15] I have, like, twenty seven questions already, about what you said, I can't help it! So you studied molecular biology and chemistry in university. So a molecular biologist, you would have had to have, like, learned about, like, I, like, isn't that, like, kind of, like, human stuff, too, molecular biology? So you do learn about, like, the skin...

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:19:32] Cells and regulation of the cells.

JVN [00:19:35] You're also the person who told me that, that our skin isn't the biggest organ. It's the, it's the, that other thing, the, that other new organ that they just discovered, like, two years ago. It's like this white connective tissue and they were, like, like, I keep wanting to say isthmus, but then that's, like, a geographical term, whatever. So you study molecular biology and chemistry. And can you, what are, like, what did you even, how do you study that in college? Because I think that's you, I don't even understand what that is?

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:20:01] Well, I wanted to do something in the life sciences or some kind of hard sciences because there's so many different career paths you can do. You can go into something that's more primary research focused. So all the stuff that goes on behind the scenes before, you know, you discover something or you can go into industry. And what I wanted to do was be in some sort of industry, kind of taking what I had. I wanted to do something that creates something.

JVN [00:20:25] OK, love that. Right. So now tell me. So you come out of school, you start working for this one company, you work, you make hundreds of products, hundreds of formulas, and then you hear about Biossance? So what do you do, you're walking down the street in San Francisco and then what happens?

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:20:39] So what happened was I learned about Biossance before Biossance was even around. And it was really interesting because I knew about squalene. I used to use squalene as a formulator. It was just a go-to for so many ingredients. And there was this company that made a brand around it, around their own sugarcane-derived squalene, which was really unique at the time because there weren't a whole lot of sources for it. You know, the shark liver story. So what our parent company Amyris was doing was just so innovative and unique and at the time, they had just

launched the Biossance line, and it was so small, it was so new, and it needed to be built out, and then all of a sudden I found myself here.

JVN [00:21:24] So as a literal product formulator slash chemist, are there any things that you see in products and you're just like, "Oh, I can't, I don't use that," like, once you, like, for me, I think when I see sodium lauryl sulphate, I'm just, like, "I don't want to like it. I'm not here for the squeaky clean. I already know I'm going to feel dry. I'm gonna feel cracky." what's what are the things that you just, like, don't wanna fuck with.

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:21:43] In skincare or haircare?

JVN [00:21:46] Both. People want to know.

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:21:49] OK, in haircare. I thought it wasn't a big deal to you, silicones or not, but once I stopped using it, I actually noticed a really big difference in my curl pattern forming again.

JVN [00:22:01] Really?

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:22:02] And it might be different. It works for some people, doesn't work for everyone. But I actually found a big difference, and a friend of mine once told me that if you used to cut your hair collects dust, which I thought was like, I don't know how science-y that is, but I noticed a difference. So once I started switching to things, I used, like, lighter emollients and even just formulating with hemisqualene, I noticed a big difference.

JVN [00:22:23] I have noticed in my hair not that I'm, like, trying to do, like, such a hardcore ad sales pitch for my own haircare line. I'm here talking to our elite formula, our elite formulator and chemist, I will say, I fully stopped keratin treating my hair because I used to, like, keratin treatments on my hair, like, every, like, I used to do, like, every six weeks for maybe like a year back in twenty thirteen. And then I switched to, like, more, like, twice a year, like, ever since then and now I haven't done one at all since like the middle of 2019 and it just is, like-, or, maybe, like, the end of 2019. But yeah my hair just feels like so much better. I don't need, like, I just don't have as much frizz. It's not as dry. It is more manageable. Yeah. Wait, do you know what, how do the keratins, like, what's that do with. Why-, is it really the formaldehyde?

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:23:13] I think so. That's part of it. To seal it in. And I don't actually know that much about the treatment because I've never tried one. But I think it has to do with hair bonds, right.

JVN [00:23:25] Like, curing it with the heat. Yea, cause you have to-, and then the ones are, like, formaldehyde-free, like, never really work, I feel like it's, like, I need that, like, nasty chemical. Okay, what other things don't you use? Silicones.

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:23:35] Okay, in haircare. I did go sulfate-free. The thing is, I don't think sulfates are terrible, but oftentimes they work too well, so they can make her feel a little too clean. So we still want hair to feel moisturized, but I think sulfates can be used, they're just oftentimes a little too strong, but I still think there's some better alternatives with that we're using.

JVN [00:24:01] Is mineral oil as bad as we think it is. Or is it true that there's different grades of mineral oil?

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:24:09] There are different grades, but you have, you have to think about where it comes from. So it's always a petroleum.

JVN [00:24:15] Is it literally from a mineral?

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:24:18] Yes, it's, it's all that's all coming from a petroleum stream, that's how that's processed, so it's, it's not horrible for you, but if you can use squalene instead, that would be the recommendation.

JVN [00:24:38] OK. OK, now, what do you-, I wanted to make sure I get everything. Also, you guys, I want you to know, I could interview Ramya for 17 hours. We do have, like, the most power-packed day of all time. We are entrepreneurs. We are business people. We are running all over San Francisco today doing the most. So we really do have, like, a hard thirty five minute episode for y'all today. So that is kind of what our truth is. What tips do we have for listeners hoping to become better informed about the beauty products they're using and the purchases they're making?

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:25:06] I think less is more when it comes to products, just fewer, better things. Find something you like and use it. If I think of skincare, I'm really boring with skincare. You can have a whole bunch of products, but all you need is moisture sometimes. Everything else is a "nice to have." Same goes with haircare. Find a routine that you like and works for you.

JVN [00:25:33] So what's your, for your curls, because you're the prettiest curls, what is, like, a day in, day out hair product that you always use.

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:25:42] From our line?

JVN [00:29:44] Yeah, or just, or is it just, like, is it like is it, cause I hear you say with skincare, it's, like, sometimes all you need is moisture. So I'm guessing maybe sometimes you're only using, like, moisturizer and some SPF.

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:25:54] Yeah.

JVN [00:25:54] So if you only have one product for your hair, is it, like, I mean, from, I will say from ours, it's air dry cream, because it's a one stop shop for my curls. It's everything. Yeah. And I have, I've always been looking for, like, a one product curly air dry or diffuse just, like, a one stop shop curly hair product. I do think we did it with our erdreich cream. I'm not going to lie, it's beautiful. It's like the most damning squalene. He's made this cream so beautiful, so interesting. But what, like, what genre of hair product must you have.

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:26:23] Conditioner.

JVN [00:26:24] I was just thinking mask as well.

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:26:26] Conditioner and mask. So, can't go wrong, I just my, my hair likes it, never gets tired of it. We have some hacks with our conditioners where we've been using them as leave-ins. I've used the Embody conditioner as a co-wash before when I don't feel like shampooing the next day. So between conditioners and masks, those are my go to.

JVN [00:26:52] What are your hopes for the beauty industry in terms of formula development, sourcing, and testing? I mean, like, your real ones, like, what? Like, do you feel like things are too polarized? Do you feel like things are too, like, like, is it, like, more inclusive, less opinionated, more clean, what, just, like, literally. What are your actual thoughts on, like, the beauty industry and what are your real hopes for, like, what continues to happen?

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:27:20] Same goes I, I want to say just being thoughtful of ingredients that are being used. So use things responsibly. As far as testing, I think there's definitely more opportunity for testing because I have, you know, worked in collaborations with companies that don't want to test because, you know, there's an expense associated. So sometimes I've seen certain shortcuts being taken, but sometimes it's better to be thorough and make sure you want a product that actually does do something and you should be able to substantiate it. I think that's really important. And then, of course, you

know, it's really interesting because when I, in the early days of Biossance, I, as we were going international, I learned that when you go into other countries, you have to be able to prove your product is safe. So it just takes a lot longer versus-

JVN [00:28:15] In other countries.

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:28:17] Yeah, it's a much longer process. So I think over here, things are generally regarded as safe, you have to do some work, but I think they are more, there are definitely a lot more restrictions when you go international, which is good. You know, it's good learning and good inspiration for all the considerations that are being taken.

JVN [00:28:37] Do you, is, is this one step too far? Would you agree that you hope that, like, maybe in the United States, like, we get, like, more stringent, like, regulations, like, what the EU does or Australia does or Japan?

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:28:47] I think I'd be great.

JVN [00:28:48] Yeah, I do too.

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:28:49] It's more work, but it's just thoroughness, and it makes things a lot more objective, too. So as far as how you feel about a product.

JVN [00:28:58] So, not to, like, hardcore humble brag, because we don't that much more time. But what are some of the most exciting innovations for JVN Hair and some of the things that we've created together, which obviously we're not the first people ever that-, or maybe there is some things that we are kind of really did do some hardcore innovation around. But, like, what are some of the things that you really excited for, for us?

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:29:16] I'm really excited about the moisture mask because it works on so many different hair types and we've gone all the way from just 1A to 4C curls, and everyone who's used it seemed to like it.

JVN [00:29:33] One thing about the moisture mask I think is incredible is that it's very concentrated. And so I feel like it's not one of those things where, like, you have to use so much if you have more 4C or really tight, like, obviously the more hair you have, the more product anyone's going to have to use. But it's not one of those things where, like, you use it, like, twice and it's gone. It really, if you like, it goes a far way. What else are you excited for? I'm excited for our pre-wash scalp oil.

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:30:59] Oh yeah.

JVN [00:30:01] The turmeric is, like, everything. I feel like-, and also, like, when you put those in together, like, do the scalp oil and then put the mask over all your hair, let it sit for, like, thirty minutes. It's like another like, it's like a whole other level.

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:30:12] It just feels like a treat. And I know this sounds boring, but I love to Nurture shampoo, too. And everyone's like, "Who can get excited about a shampoo?" But this one just feels really good.

JVN [00:30:22] I have a question. Is it possible? I think that we have done it. So I guess I'll spoiler alert and say yes. But, like, when people aren't buying our line of shampoo, can a shampoo really be nurture-, or can a shampoo really be hydrating, if it's only a shampoo by itself.

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:30:38] On its own? Not really. You need to put some conditioning element into it. And also the concentrations of the cleansing agents make a really big difference in how you work with them. So there's certain ratios so that you get that right balance of foam without being too strippy.

JVN [00:30:54] Yes, I'm so excited for people to buy our Embody conditioner because if you don't like conditioner but, like, I love conditioner, but our Embody conditioner is amazing cause it makes your hair hydrated, but it makes it so not flat and so just full of body and movement and life. It's everything. How do we acquire our ingredients?

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:31:12] We have certain parameters that we use when we select ingredients, so there's a lot of things we won't use that relate to just international global restrictions, or if something might be-, have some flags around it. We're just, again, prefer fewer better ingredients and really strip something down to what actually is needed in a formula. And that gives us a starting point for everything. If you think about functionality and the feel and the performance, that's a lot of it. And then we look at, you know, as far as sourcing, we want to see where it's coming from. Just make sure the whole supply chain is steady and sustainable. And the other piece to it is also thinking about the whole manufacturing process. We just are making sure we're very thoughtful with partners we select just to make sure the whole supply chain feels ethically sourced and responsible.

JVN [00:32:04] How do we validate or verify the sustainability of an ingredient, like, of a new ingredient bit that we find? Like, we find some lavender in Bulgaria? Like, how do we, like, do we send, like, a cute little team out there to make sure that it's all on the up and up?

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:32:17] We-, there are questionnaires that we send out as we're vetting new partners just to make sure that values align. And we also want to make sure something's not going to be, you know, finite or have an issue, because that's, that's a consideration we need to think about.

JVN [00:32:34] Totally, because you've got to be, like, have enough products. OK, that's good. Oh, packaging.

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:32:42] Oh, yeah.

JVN [00:32:42] Yeah, we've gotta talk about packaging, so I felt like with this line, like, I was determined to not make a line out of plastic. I just felt like there's so much shampoo, there's so much conditioner, there's so many haircare products. And, well, I did feel like we could make an innovative, unique formula that brings something new to people that they don't already have, especially with hemisqualene. I do feel like we have created a product that does give people something they haven't had before and it does create a different result that is just beautiful. And, like, it's not really something that's regularly on the market.

But I just, like, I can't put all this plastic with my name on it makes me sad. I will say that when I said that, like, twenty seven thousand times on Zooms, I do feel like your eyes were like, "Oh, fuck me. I'm really going to have to, like, we've gotta figure this out because this queen's not using plastic." But man, did you ever rise to the challenge. Yeah. Oh my God. So you really did do-. But you know what? You taught me this thing that I didn't know. Listen to this everyone. True story is it has an enclosure, if it, if the, if the container opens or closes, we literally don't have the technology to make it, like, one hundred percent plastic-free right now. Like, if the thing opens or closes, you have to use, like, a trace amount of plastic, like, in the cap to, like, make it screw.

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:33:52] To seal it, otherwise it leaks. If you're, for example, if you have an aluminum cap, there's a tiny percentage of a lining, which still, I think, is a lot of steps in the right direction. Because if you think about the footprint overall, there isn't much plastic in the line. All of the containers don't use any plastic. And we're going to continue with that. And we're working on innovations for closures.

JVN [00:34:15] Our goal is 2025, is to be plastic-free, so far. That's our goal for now.

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:34:19] It's a good goal.

JVN [00:34:21] You're give me the same face that you gave me when I said we-

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:34:24] No, we actually made some progress on one of the containers, that we're definitely able to reduce it. So there's a material that's being tested right now.

JVN [00:34:32] And the body of our shampoos, conditioners, like, every, like, the body of them all, there's no-, it's only, like, the lids.

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:34:38] There's no plastic. Yeah, there's no plastic in the bodies of anything. So the containers have no plastic, which seemed like it was going to be a challenge in the beginning. But there's always a responsible way. And, and you and I talked about, you know, as we're doing our vintage bag collecting, how did products hold themselves before? So we just kind of went back in time to tried and tested materials that are also readily recyclable.

JVN [00:35:04] Weren't you the one that told me that, like, startling statistic about aluminum? That's so interesting? Do you remember what I'm talking about?

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:35:11] Yeah. So I think Catherine had found, found, found out about this one, but we, 70 percent of aluminum is from recycled aluminum, something like that. And it's also infinitely recyclable.

JVN [00:35:27] And it was, it was also that it was, like, seventy percent of all the aluminum made since, like, 1950-something is still in use. So yeah. Like, it really is so infinitely recyclable.

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:35:37] And it's so usable. I think of the can crushers from way back when. And it still has a value and you trade it back in.

JVN [00:35:44] OK, so now we've reached the end of our podcast, which I'm devastated for because we really could talk so much longer. But is there anything that we missed or that you want people to know about JVN Hair, about Biossance, about your job as a chemist and a formulator? About science, about fierce ladies in science. Is there anything?

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:36:01] Products are meant to be enjoyed. Skincare and haircare is supposed to be fun.

JVN [00:36:08] It's true, yeah, it is true, it is going to be fun and full of self-care and also, like, not too much of a drag on the planet.

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:36:18] You can have it all.

JVN [00:36:19] You can! Because of people like you. Thank you, Ramya!

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:36:23] We did it together.

JVN [00:36:24] We did! We did do it together. But you really led me. So thank you so much.

RAMYA VISWANATHAN [00:36:27] Thank you.

JVN [00:36:30] You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. My guest this week was Ramya Viswanathan.

You'll find links to her work in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on.

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