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## Taking on Hair Color's Bad Guy

By CATHERINE SAINT LOUIS

PERMANENTLY dyeing hair goes hand in hand with damaging it. The process dries out hair and leaves it jagged. Ammonia — used to open the hair fiber so that dye molecules can nestle in — is as delicate as a can opener. It also smells horrid and sets delicate scalps afire.

So it's not surprising that makers of lasting hair color have long sought an ammonia-free alternative that offers thorough gray coverage and a less unpleasant experience. Now, L'Oréal Professionnel is touting INOA, which stands for Innovation No Ammonia, as that game-changer, one on par, they say, with the advent of DVD's or GPS.

With INOA, "hair is as smooth as it was before hair color," said Paul Schiraldi, the vice president for marketing of L'Oréal Professionnel in the United States. If INOA catches on to the extent the company's executives hope, Mr. Schiraldi said, "damage with coloring will be a thing of the past."

Some salon colorists, who used to be skeptical that an ammonia-free dye could offer enviable results, adore INOA (pronounced in-oh-uh). A few celebrity hairstylists like the pink-shirted Ted Gibson switched to L'Oréal Professionnel partly to get first dibs on bringing INOA to their clientele. Even Eva Scrivo, a colorist and spokeswoman for Wella, a dye maker, is testing INOA in her Manhattan salon as part of the initial rollout to 200 handpicked salons. Come May, INOA, which can cost about 15 percent more than other lasting dyes, will be more widely available.

But is it truly an innovation for the roughly 38 million women nationwide who have their hair dyed professionally? Only time will tell if ammonia fumes in salons will go the way of smoking in Manhattan bars. INOA bills itself as a "revolution," but it is not the first ammonia-free permanent color to grace these shores. So why hasn't the idea gathered steam before?

It could be that L'Oréal Professionnel is the first to "remove ammonia and deliver amazing results" as Mr. Schiraldi put it. Or the company may just be the first with enough marketing muscle and broad distribution to get the graying masses (and colorists) to embrace a sea change.

"To say we don't need ammonia in permanent hair color is a big deal," said Lotus Abrams, the executive editor at American Salon magazine, a trade publication. For 50 years — if not longer — it's been a given that lasting hair dye requires ammonia, so its ghastly odor must be endured. "When you go to the salon and it doesn't smell, it's just better for the customer, it's better for salon staff."

Some demi-permanent hair dyes "claim to be ammonia-free," said Ms. Abrams, who tried INOA at no charge on Feb. 11 and reports that her golden brown hue has stayed true. "But they aren't permanent." That is, they gradually fade and don't uniformly cover gray.

Demi-permanent dyes often use an ammonia alternative called MEA, or monoethanolamine, to more gently open the hair shaft. With MEA, it's as if the cuticle is a door that's slightly ajar, not swung wide open as it is with ammonia. That translates to less damage, depending on quantity.

Two colorists of note, Ms. Scrivo and Beth Minardi, urged women not to discount a demi-permanent ability to banish gray. For clients with dark brown hair with interspersed gray, Ms. Minardi, the color director at her namesake salon in Manhattan, has used a demi-permanent dye to turn the gray to a light brown. "It makes you look like you have \$500 worth of highlights," said Ms. Minardi, who is a spokeswoman for Joico, a maker of hair dyes. Ms. Scrivo said of demi-permanents, "There are many things a trained colorist can do to make a formulation a bit more lasting."

As for permanent color, INOA, which uses some MEA and is applied to dry hair, looks like an oily yogurt once mixed. Its color dye molecules "don't like oil" and are attracted to the water inside the hair, said Jo Blackwell-Preston, a color educator for L'Oréal Professionnel and owner of Dop Dop salon in SoHo, so they "force themselves inside your hair."

At least two other ammonia-free permanent hair colors are already used in salons. One called Organic Color Systems, made by Herb UK, a company based in Lyminster, England, has been available stateside since 2002, now in 65 colors (compared with INOA's 49). Roughly 1,200 salons carry it, up from 400 in 2008, said Hilton Bell, the president of International Hair and Beauty Systems, the United States distributor for Organic Color Systems.

Its magic bullet is heat coupled with an oil base. "What we do is actually suspend color molecules in an oil base, which softens the cuticle, and then we use heat to open the cuticle," Mr. Bell said, rather than "blowing it open with ammonia."

In an e-mail message, he wrote: "We have been stating for years that ammonia-free and the oil-based method is a better way to color hair, for the hairdresser and the client. The fact that L'Oréal is saying the same thing now, just legitimizes the fact."

In a phone interview, Mr. Schiraldi conceded that INOA is "not the first." But he argued that its performance distinguishes it. No other permanent hair color can deliver "vibrant color, great coverage and maintain the condition of the hair prior," he said. "There's a reason none of these other brands have become successful, and you can't chalk that up to marketing buzz."

In Mr. Bell's view, that reason has a lot to do with entrenched thinking. Eight years ago, convincing hairdressers that an ammonia-free hair dye could offer superior coverage was akin to suggesting the world wasn't flat when everyone believed it was, he said.

Distribution plays a role, too. For three years, Mastey De Paris, a family business in Valencia, Calif., has offered a zero-ammonia permanent hair dye called Teinture. It "gently opens" the hair shaft with a proprietary amino-acid based alkaline agent, so there's no MEA, either, said Erick Calderon, the vice president for business development. Teinture has made inroads in Florida and southern California, he said, but only recently found a New York distributor. (L'Oréal Professionnel has national distribution.)

Anne Warnock is an owner of the Sam Wong Salon in Frederick, Md., which uses Organic Color Systems. During the last three years, she has used it every four weeks to maintain her red locks and has noted a difference. Her hair no longer has that dry, over-processed feeling, she said.

To her mind, INOA, which she has no interest in using since it's not organic enough for her, is noteworthy. "Now that L'Oréal has jumped on the bandwagon, it's the beginning of women being educated who also want results," she said, referring to the market for no-ammonia permanent color. "In time, women will go into a salon and ask, 'What color do you use? Does it have ammonia?'"