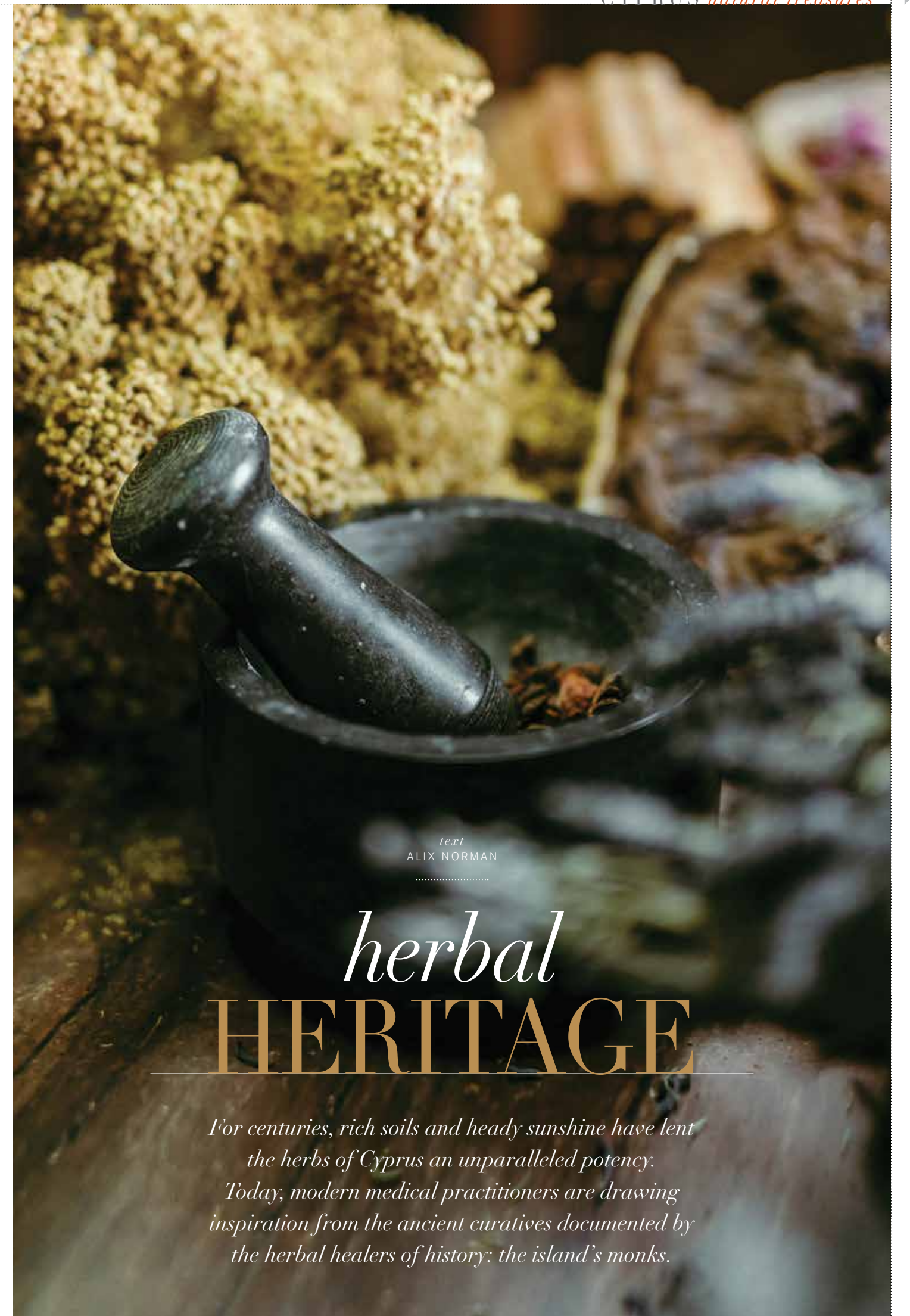


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**HIDDEN AWAY**  
in the monastery's ancient library of Machairas Monastery is a time-worn manuscript which has become the bible for herbalists and naturopaths all over the world: the *Iatrosophikon*.



text  
ALIX NORMAN

# herbal HERITAGE

*For centuries, rich soils and heady sunshine have lent the herbs of Cyprus an unparalleled potency. Today, modern medical practitioners are drawing inspiration from the ancient curatives documented by the herbal healers of history: the island's monks.*



**GEORGE ELLINAS,**

*one of the best-known herbalists on the island, suggests that it is the climate which makes the herbs of Cyprus unique, but that the monks deserve credit for curating and recording remedies passed down from generation to generation.*

In his botanical survey of the Roman Empire, Pliny the Elder described the herbs of Cyprus as “the best in the world”. And, to this day, basil, rosemary, and oregano saturate the breeze with their potent Mediterranean aroma, tinting the hillsides silver green, sunshine yellow, and dusty purple. Along with this herbal holy trinity comes a pantheon of potent plants: indigenous varieties which have been prized for centuries by one of the world’s greatest (and most guarded) repositories of herbal lore – the monasteries of Cyprus.

**THE BOOK OF WISDOM**

Quiet sanctuaries, some centuries old, the monasteries of Cyprus have long been the seat of religious study in a country which was the first in the world to convert to Christianity. But they are also the source of incredible wisdom when it comes to the healing power of herbs. Machairas Monastery is, quite possibly, the best known in this respect; even today, pilgrims in search of medical knowledge flock to the sprawling hermitage perched atop a single mountain rising from the plain. But perhaps its greatest treasure is hidden away in the monastery’s ancient library – a time-worn manuscript which has become the bible for herbalists and naturopaths all over the world: the *Iatrosophikon*.

Loosely translating as the ‘Book of Medical Wisdom’ and also known as the *Codex Machairas*, the *Iatrosophikon* was compiled by Philotheos – a well-known healer and monk of the 1800s. A collection of folk recipes and remedies – many of which utilize indigenous herbs – it is considered to be a significant contribution to our knowledge of ancient medicinal practice. While the original manuscript is

handwritten in the Cypriot dialect, the English translation (by Kyriacos Demetriades and Andreas K Demetriades, with indispensable commentary from renowned horticultural expert, Giorgios N Hadjikyriakou) is known and revered far and wide.

“To this day, the *Iatrosophikon* informs both herbalists and naturopaths, not just in Cyprus but around the world,” reveals Alexander McCowan, both a historian and an authority on the island’s flora. This herbal expert describes the tome as “probably the world’s foremost historical work on the medicinal usage of herbs through the ages,” while agreeing that some of its treatments – a cure for baldness, for example – may be slightly outmoded!

**A HERBAL HISTORY**

The manuscript is a mine of information that proves Pliny’s adage. One of the best-known herbalists on the island, George Ellinas, suggests that it is the climate which makes the herbs of Cyprus unique, along with the wealth of knowledge passed down from generation to generation. “Every village had a herbal doctor, but it’s the monks – scribes at a time when few could read or write – who curated and documented this information,” he reveals. “As we moved into the 20th century, and people began to rely on chemicals and doctors, much of this traditional herblore was lost, so the *Iatrosophikon* has become most valuable.”

Amongst the herbal cures which still stand are milk thistle, known to repair and detox the liver, as well as a mixture of honey, garlic and cayenne pepper for sore throats. Hawthorn is referenced in the *Iatrosophikon* as good for the heart and for balancing blood pressure – properties for which it is now commercially prized. And sage, George explains, has long been utilized both to clear the mind and to treat snakebites. “In fact,” he adds, “if you’re bitten while out in the fields, a poultice of sage will give you time to get to the hospital!”

“Granted,” he adds, “there are a few slightly alarming remedies” – mercury to reduce blood clots, for example – “which we now know are extremely detrimental to the health. But much of the herblore handed down to us through history and described by the monks of old still stands. And, as more and more people return to holistic medicine, we’re rediscovering the ancient uses of herbs such as sage, thyme, and in particular wild oregano,” which, he adds, was shipped in bulk to Alexander the Great as he battled his way across the known world, and was used to heal his soldiers’ wounds. Today, we know the herb is a powerful antiseptic.





EMPLOYING THE  
ANCIENT UNDERSTANDING  
OF HERBLORE,  
*Inna Orlova (bottom right) and  
Elena Elraie (bottom left) have  
created the award-winning brand,  
Kypwell, which is synonymous with  
high-performance skincare essentials,  
herbal teas, and personalized wellbeing  
programmes based solely on organic,  
locally-grown herbs.*

“More than 1000 herbs grow wild on the island, and these varieties are always particularly potent,” he explains. “If a plant has survived the heat, the cold and the lack of water, it tends to have greater medicinal value; plus, herbs which have grown without fertilizer, chemicals, or sprays in an area of biodiversity are particularly valuable.”

#### INNOVATIVE INSIGHTS

This ancient understanding of herblore is also employed by Inna Orlova and Elena Elraie in their award-winning premium wellbeing brand, Kypwell. The product line – which features high-performance skincare essentials, herbal teas, and personalized wellbeing programmes and services – is the first based solely on organic, locally-grown herbs... for good reason.

“In Kypwell, we’ve combined ancient knowledge with the most innovative approaches to natural skin care developments today: a combination of heritage and modern formulations,” Inna explains. With no need for synthetic chemicals – “the essential oils in the herbs act as preservatives, a fact the monks of old applied to food preservation,” Elena clarifies – Kypwell employs a medley of indigenous flora.

“Damascan rose, elder, chamomile, and geranium are our holy herbs, contained in almost every product in our skincare line. Rose, for example, is an antiseptic, antiviral, antifungal, and anti-inflammatory which relieves, nourishes, and moisturizes. It is referenced in the Iatrosophikon as a remedy for infections of the ears, eyes and gums, as well as an aid to both health and beauty” – properties which have made the duo’s Signature Flower Mist Toner a global award-winner!

#### MODERN SANCTUARY

As modern herbalists build on the monastic musings of the Iatrosophikon, this valuable ancient knowledge is once more being appreciated around the world. Even here, at the Four Seasons, the distilled wisdom of the ages can be found in both the ‘Cyprus Mountain Mixed Herbal’ and ‘Chamomile Flower’ tea blends (based on ancient remedies from the Monastery of Mesa Potamos) at Colors café. As you sip your herbal tea in this modern – if not quite as monastic! – retreat, you can almost imagine Philotheos himself savouring each restorative sip, centuries ago in his own sanctuary, while documenting the healing powers of the herbs of Cyprus.