

The New York Times

October 24, 2012

A Popular Twist on Putting Hair in Its Place

By KAYLEEN SCHAEFER

SOME Americans travel to Tokyo for omakase sushi or karaoke. But three years ago, a few members of the Goody marketing department went there for, according to the company, “inspiration.”

What they found, in a shop whose name they’ve forgotten, was an approximately four-inch-long hairstyling accessory that looked like the spine of a spiral-bound notebook.

“It was in a plain cellophane bag with no how-to-use instructions,” said Catherine Arpey, a senior brand marketing manager at Goody. “We were wondering: ‘What is this thing? How do you use this?’ ”

After some experimenting with lighter steel and a tighter coil, the souvenir inspired the Goody Simple Styles Spin Pin, a metal double helix that works like a corkscrew to secure messy-on-purpose buns and topknots. It had its debut in the spring of 2010, in a dark and light shade (\$5.99-\$6.99 for two), and quickly became Goody’s No. 1 hair accessory, even outselling the ponytail elastic. (The elastic has since snapped back, but the Spin Pin is still in the top 10.)

Now the Spin Pin has a twin.

In July, Kim Taylor Bennett, 32, who works for Time Out London, started selling Kimby Springs, which resemble Goody’s hit accessory, albeit a bit shorter and only in black. Ms. Bennett said in a phone interview that she used similar spirals called Hair Scroos in the ’90s, buying them at the British drugstore Boots but could no longer find them.

Googling helped her locate look-alikes in China. “I thought, ‘Why don’t I ship a ton out from China and sell them online just in the U.K.?’ ” she said.

She designed simple blue-and-black packaging, labeled them a “hair taming device,” priced them at around \$5 for two and said she had already received orders from the United States and Ghana through kimbysprings.com.

Ms. Bennett isn't worried that the product might not have been hers to put her nickname on. "I don't know about patents," she said. "I kind of hadn't considered it. We're all stealing from each other."

Indeed, it turns out that Betty Dain Creations, a salon apparel company known for its whimsical shower caps, also makes a similar hair twister. The company's Corkscrew Pin was introduced a year and a half ago and is sold at Sally Beauty (\$4.50 for two). "I'm not really sure too much what the differences are," said Kristin Currey, regional account manager for Betty Dain. "We have a really good price point."

Patent lawyers said that the curlicue hair accessory most likely can't be safeguarded in any of the usual ways, which is why it is being copied so widely around the world. Even if the original creators, perhaps a company in Japan or China, were to apply, they would probably be rejected (many countries have similar rules for patents).

"I think this thing falls through the cracks of being protectable," said Toni Tease, a patent lawyer in Billings, Mont. "Is it possible that someone might have filed with the copyright office? They might have, but in my experience, they'd have a tough time getting it through."

Michael Gallagher, a partner at Gallagher and Dawsey, a specialty intellectual property law firm in Columbus, Ohio, said, "Since it's really nothing more than a corkscrew, and that's been around forever, I would think the chance of anyone getting a patent on it would be fairly low."

According to Stan Chudzik, Goody's senior industrial design engineer, the Spin Pin that he helped refine was more than just a corkscrew. "It's a double helix with one spiral going in one direction and one going in the opposite," he said. "Me being the geek that I am, it reminds me of a DNA structure."

Unlike DNA, however, it is not unique. And that's just fine with Goody.

"It would be hard for us to go after any competitors," said Kim Hoelting, Goody's vice president for marketing for beauty and style. "We told you the story of its origin."