

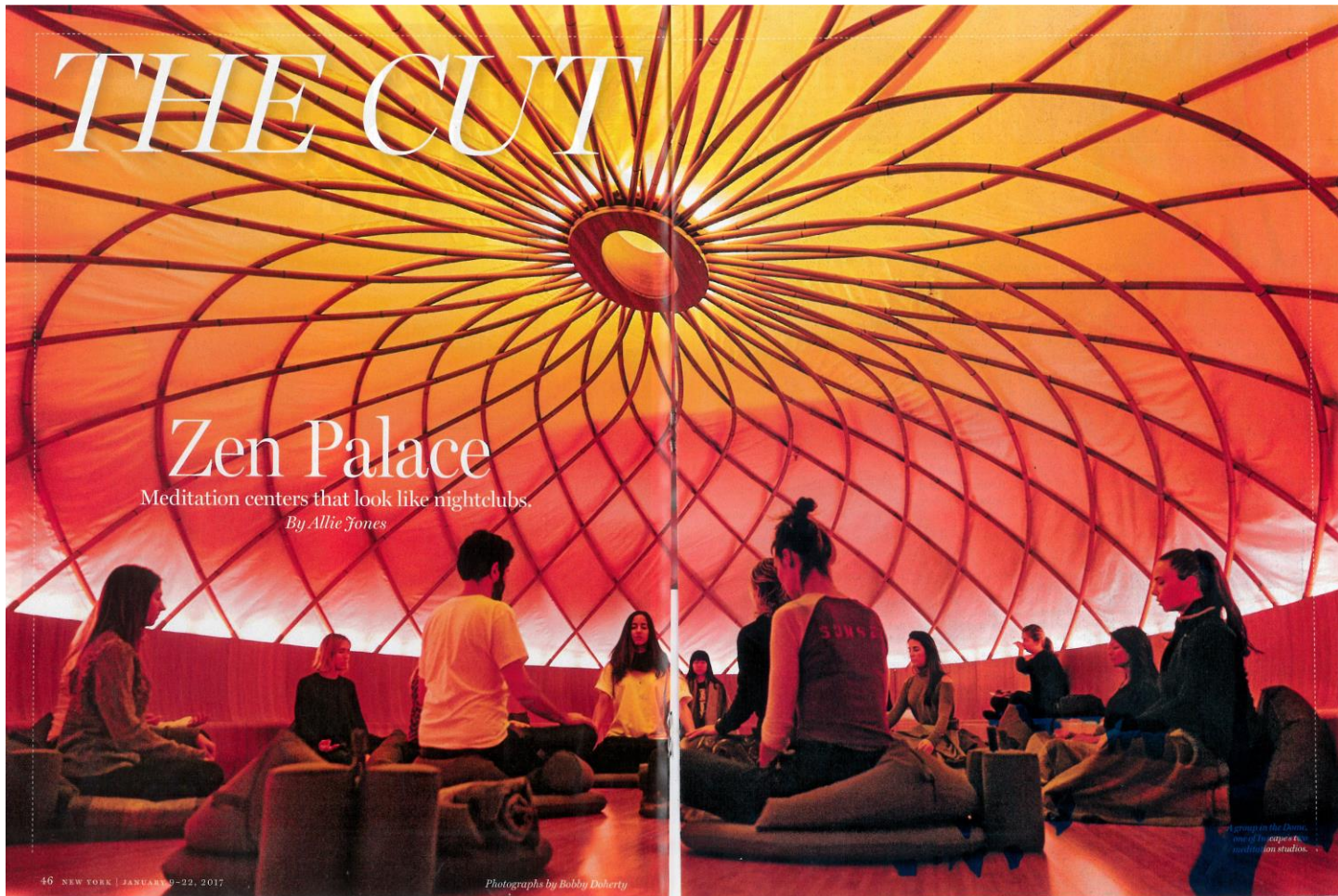
NEW YORK

January 9-22, 2017
Circulation: 405,398

THE CUT

Zen Palace

Meditation centers that look like nightclubs.
By Allie Jones



People in the dome, one of the newer meditation studios.

To

REACH ENLIGHTENMENT, guests at New York's newest luxury meditation center must first pass through the gift shop. The retail space at Inscape, which opened in the Flatiron District in November, offers "gifts for yourself and others to nourish your body and mind," according to the sign painted above a scented-candle display. The airy white shop carries everything a Moon Juice-worshipping wellness enthusiast could want, including the full line of the cult Los Angeles juicery's signature Chinese herb packets, called "dusts." For junkies who have all of those already, there are other potions for sale, like manuka rose "cleansing grains" (for the face) and vegan chocolate made with kale (for the carefully monitored digestive tract). And, of course, there is oil. Lots and lots of tiny vials filled with healing, transformative oil. On my first visit, I weighed Uma's Pure Rest Wellness Oil (\$85) against Akaliko's Rosehip Radiance Nectar (\$65) against Lalun Naturals' Astral Body Silver Moondrops (\$65) against my future child's college education. At Inscape, finding Zen and finding an aesthetically pleasing new candle is all part of the same journey. The actual meditation classes start at \$18 per session.

This aspirational meld of retail and mindfulness comes from Khajak Keledjian, the 43-year-old founder and former CEO of Intermix, a chain of women's boutiques featuring a curated mix of established and up-and-coming designers. As a harried, numbers-obsessed executive, Keledjian found meditation ten years ago. When he sold Intermix to the Gap for \$130 million in 2013, he decided to make wellness his business. The result is Inscape: a 5,000-square-foot bourgeois meditation playspace, complete with the shop, two meditation studios, and a community space filled with beanbag chairs, adult coloring books, and a butterfly-themed art installation by Arianna Huffington's daughter Isabella. (New meditators start as caterpillars and become ...) For those who cannot visit this mecca, Inscape has a subscription-based app loaded with guided meditations and sound baths.

Sitting casually cross-legged on a beanbag, just before the New Year, Keledjian explained the allure of his new venture. Wellness has become "a new dimension to luxury," he said. "People are looking for

ways of completing their lifestyle." He was wearing a perfectly draped white T-shirt, black-and-white Stan Smiths, and a slim black fitness tracker on his wrist. At a few different points in our conversation, he brandished a small roller ball filled with essential oil, brought it right up to his nostrils, then dabbed it on the inside of his wrists. The idea for Inscape, he told me, emerged at Burning Man.

"Worse comes to worst, I take the next flight and I just leave," Keledjian remembered thinking in 2013, on a trip to the Black Rock Desert festival. But once inside the central temple, he was transfixed. He saw crowds of revelers meditating together and felt a whole "different energy": something grounded, something heavier. "I told my wife afterward, 'Wow, why aren't there places like this where you can have the same experience?'" Today, Inscape's press materials describe the space's design as "somewhere between fourth-century monasteries, the mood in the temple at Burning Man, and the feeling you get when you look at the infinite horizon line."

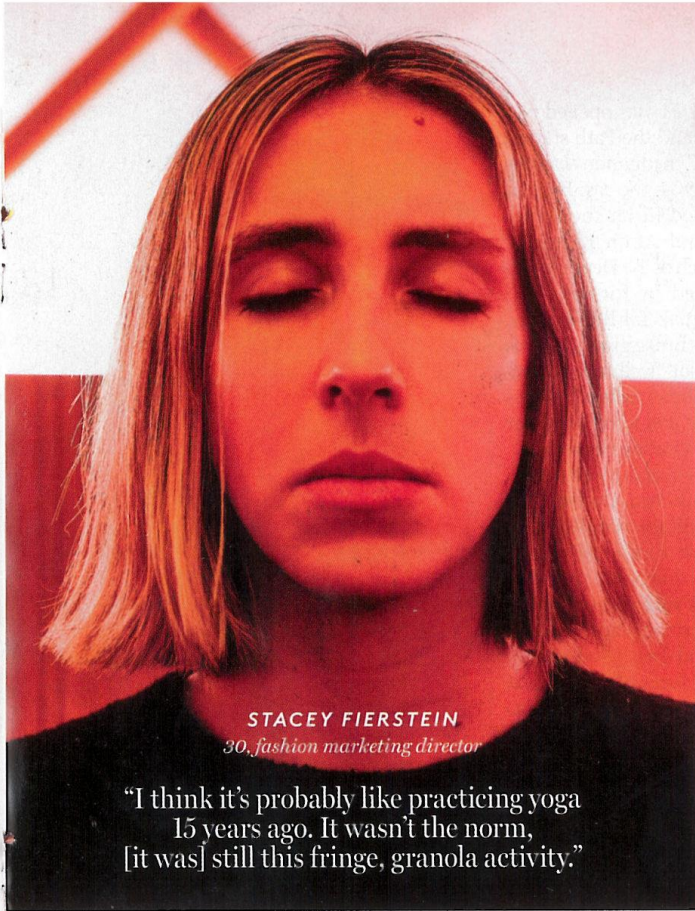
The actual vibe is a bit more sanitized than the Burning Man comparison would suggest. Everyone at Inscape is freshly showered, and the space is as pristine as the cover of the latest issue of *Kinfolk*. It even smells clean: slightly honeyed and a little bit medicinal, like the dentist's office in Heaven. The class "facilitators" look like walking ads for the fresh-faced millennial beauty brand Glossier; they all have perfect skin, cozy black-and-white outfits, and names like Charlotte, Zuzanna, and Panama. When directing guests to place their cell phones in lockers before sessions, they speak in pillow-soft, tranquilizing tones.

Inscape's average client is "anyone who's looking to have a more balanced, calm lifestyle in an urban setting," Keledjian said. Guests tend to be stylish (some are models), but the crowd is "quite a lot more diverse" than Keledjian anticipated. "We've got financial guys coming in; they come on the weekends or in the evening."

Tina Latonero, a 41-year-old stylist who has been meditating at Inscape since it opened, said she preferred the space to other, more traditional studios in town. She'd tried Buddhist meditation at a Shambhala center, but "it just didn't fit," she said. "The room was really small. It was cramped." Inscape is spacious enough that practitioners can float through the studios without ever touching each other. And the shopping is great. "Every person that I bring in there buys something," Latonero added. "It's super-curated."

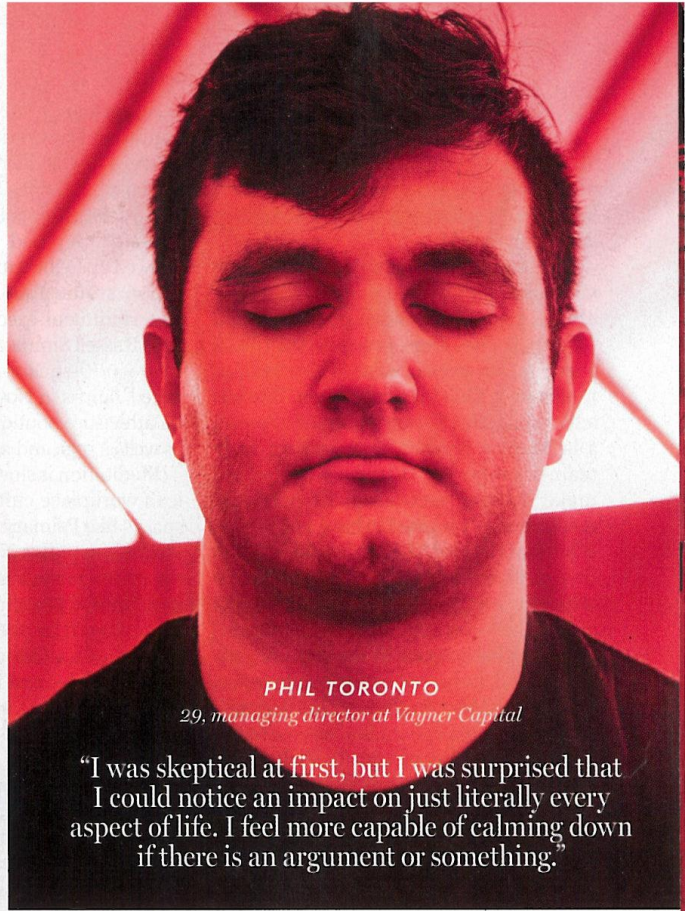
The architect Winka Dubbeldam, whose client roster includes model Chrissy Teigen and singer-songwriter John Legend, and who counts Keledjian as a longtime friend, took on the project of designing Inscape out of a personal commitment to its mission. "I've been meditating my whole life and doing yoga since high school," she said. With her firm, Archi-Tectonics, Dubbeldam conceptualized Inscape's two studios: the Dome, geared toward seated meditation, and the Alcove, for horizontal relaxation. Inside the womblike Dome, guests plop their Lululemon-covered behinds on specially designed blue-gray beanbag chairs and drape themselves in velvety, Ecuadoran alpaca blankets. The (domed) ceiling of the studio is covered in white sailcloth and bamboo; the lighting surrounding guests mimics a calming horizon. "When you feel a little unsettled" during a meditation, Dubbeldam explained, "you open your eyes a little bit, and you see this ring [of light] around you. It brings you back to where you are and settles you."

The light fixtures contain recycled cardboard; the paint is all nontoxic; the floor is bamboo. Oh, and there is "a lot of



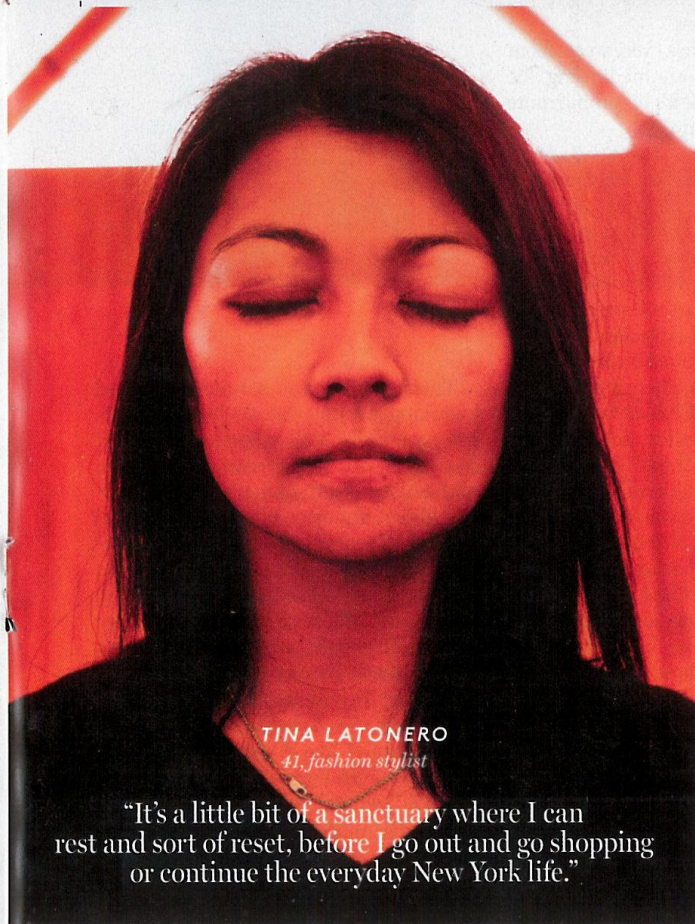
STACEY FIERSTEIN
30, fashion marketing director

"I think it's probably like practicing yoga 15 years ago. It wasn't the norm, [it was] still this fringe, granola activity."



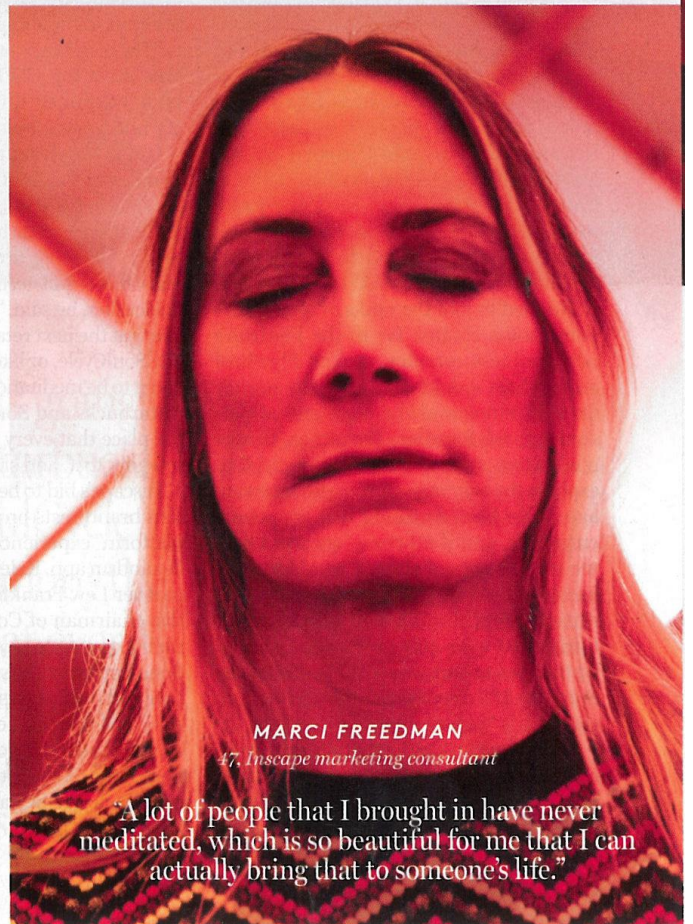
PHIL TORONTO
29, managing director at Vayner Capital

"I was skeptical at first, but I was surprised that I could notice an impact on just literally every aspect of life. I feel more capable of calming down if there is an argument or something."



TINA LATONERO
41, fashion stylist

"It's a little bit of a sanctuary where I can rest and sort of reset, before I go out and go shopping or continue the everyday New York life."



MARCI FREEDMAN
47, Inscape marketing consultant

"A lot of people that I brought in have never meditated, which is so beautiful for me that I can actually bring that to someone's life."

insulation in the floor, so you don't have this clonking sound," Dubbeldam said. "Everything is geared toward a very easy space that makes it feel effortless. But it's actually quite a bit of work to get it that way."

The meditation experience has been similarly planned and controlled. There are no gurus at Inscape; guests instead take their cues from prerecorded tracks featuring one perfect voice, which belongs to a woman Keledjian calls "Skye." She has a soothing, slightly sexy Australian accent, à la Margot Robbie. Skye was an early team member at Inscape who helped make dummy recordings of potential meditations: "I wanted to have a voice that is kind of neutral," Keledjian said. "Even though it's feminine, it's got a little bit of a strength to it, so it's kind of that middle balance between masculine and feminine." (Inscape's bathrooms, by the way, are gender neutral, indicated by the combination Venus-and-Mars symbols on the doors.)

Since both Inscape studios have surround sound, following along with Skye's direction feels a bit like listening to the voice of (an extra-fabulous) God. Class facilitators simply sit and listen alongside practitioners in case anyone has questions or wants to "share." This system is preferable to in-person instruction, Keledjian said: The consistency from meditation to meditation allows each guest to focus on herself and eventually become her "own teacher."

Since Dubbeldam's designs, Skye's voice, and Moon Juice's dusts can go anywhere, Inscape is built to scale. Marci Freedman, a 47-year-old marketing consultant for the brand, said the project "is going to be gangbusters." She pitched it as "Flywheel for meditation, Barry's Bootcamp for meditation." Physically, at least, Inscape is well positioned to join the ranks of New York's elite fitness chains: It's in the Flatiron's new wellness corridor, next to Flywheel and Exhale spa and around the corner from Equinox and the yoga-and-athleisure hybrid Bandier. Freedman thinks meditation studios have the potential to explode the way yoga studios did ten years ago. "I've been working out my whole entire life, and if 20 years ago you asked me to take a yoga class, I would say no, because I was very much into cardio and muscle conditioning and all the other things that were going on when I started working out. And now yoga is part of my everyday life," Freedman said. Meditation, she said, is "just starting."

In 2014, when the meditation-and-tarot-reading studio Unplug opened in Los Angeles, *Vogue* wondered: "Is Meditation About to Become the New SoulCycle?" Since then,

the guru-taught MNDFL has opened two studios in New York, and the Path started offering \$24 "modern" meditation sessions at pop-up locations across the city. Back in L.A., celebrities joined in on the trend. Amanda Seyfried and Anna Kendrick showed up to the launch of the Den, a meditation studio founded by former NBC Entertainment executive Tal Rabinowitz. And Russell Simmons broke ground on his own 8,000-square-foot "wellness center" called Tantris in November, which features an athleisure boutique and a blow-dry bar as well as yoga and meditation classes.

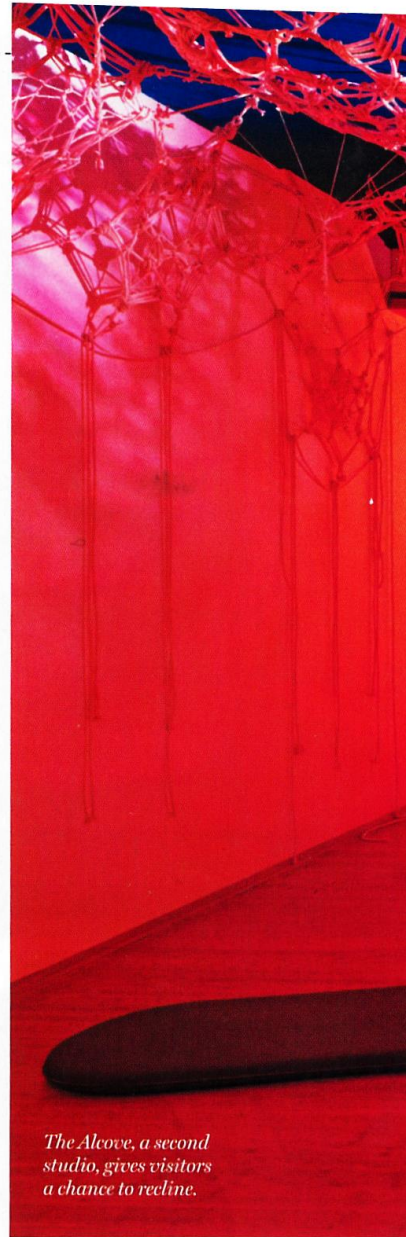
Meditation is slowly seeping into America's workplace culture, too. Co-working spaces like Primary and the soon-to-open High Court offer New York's freelancers the option to meditate during the workday, and Google preaches mindfulness to its employees. It helps that the practice can be framed as a quick-and-easy productivity booster. Keledjian is fond of saying that each person gets 1,440 minutes per day, so spending 15 minutes meditating is just one percent of the time.

Crucially, investors think meditation is cool. The meditation app Headspace raised \$34 million in investment funding in 2015. Phil Toronto, a 29-year-old managing director at Vayner Capital, said his firm invested in Inscape this year because "we're big believers in mindfulness."

"There's a buzzy article every week about how these top CEOs are meditating," he said. "I definitely think it's becoming more of a norm and a 'must do.'"

Gary Vaynerchuk, the 41-year-old founder of Vayner Capital, predicted last fall that in 20 years, meditation will be "a foundational pillar in American consumer society." During a question-and-answer session at a "MastermindTalks" conference in October, he said, "I'm 100 percent positive that the next retail explosion that looks like SoulCycle, or like Blockbuster video, is going to be meditation. There is going to be a Starbucks and SoulCycle of meditation: the place that every trendy, rich, cool person goes to ... and sits there."

Inscape's bid to be the breakout meditation brand rests on its status as a "multiplatform" experience, offering both a studio and an app. Keledjian and his business partner Lew Frankfort, the former executive chairman of Coach, are confident in their experience growing businesses. "I've done Intermix, he's done Coach," Keledjian said; wellness is "not territory that we have not charted before." But ultimately, he explains, their goal is "enhancing people's lives. We've been successful. We've been lucky. How can we share this platform with others?"



The Alcove, a second studio, gives visitors a chance to recline.

Their approach is secular, easy, and luxurious. Anyone with 20 bucks to burn can drop in for a 33-minute session that requires no prior experience or knowledge of the history of the practice, and Keledjian likes it that way. When he first heard about meditation, he was wary of the religious aspect of it. "I thought if I'm gonna do it, it becomes a cult or a religion that I'm going to get into, and, like, that's not happening," he said. Inscape offers all different kinds of meditation on one platform, sans preaching. This allows guests to consider all their options, Keledjian explained.

It's "kind of like if you go to Bergdorf Goodman or the Barneys cosmetics section," he said. "You tell them you want to buy a lipstick. If you ask the Chanel person, they'll



tell you their red lipstick is the best for you. How do you know what Dior has to offer? They're not going to send you over there."

Inscape offers "focus," "mantra," and "mindfulness" meditations, and no one practice is advertised as better than the rest. For more adventurous meditators, there are evening "sound baths" in the Alcove studio, which features a dream-catcher-and-rope installation by the artist Tini Courtney. The week before Christmas, I brought a friend to a 66-minute "deep sound" session, and all we had to do was lie down and listen to different bell tones. We left feeling less like we had attended a New Age ceremony and more like we had just had a massage. Indeed, at times, the combined effect of the alpaca blankets and the

"There is going to be a Starbucks and SoulCycle of meditation: the place that every trendy, rich, cool person goes to ... and sits there."

Aussie voice and the honey smell is perhaps too good. At the end of my first 33-minute mantra meditation session, I jerked awake to realize I had just taken an \$18 nap. I am not sure I ever found my center during any of the sessions I tried, but I always left feeling almost relaxed enough to buy an \$85 bottle of oil.

Keledjian is clear that he does not want practitioners to become ascetic. Coming from a luxury background, he's careful to note that "it's not one or the other." He can speak "very easily" about meditation, he says, "but at the same time, I am wearing a couple-thousand-dollar jacket. It's not like I've given everything away. It's just, how am I integrating this to complete the lifestyle?" ■