



Making Scents

WORDS MICHAELA WHITE

THE ART OF THE PERFUMER IS A SORT OF ALCHEMY. THERE IS SOMETHING TRULY MAGICAL IN THE SKILL AND CRAFTSMANSHIP OF THE ARTIST WHO FUSES THE ESSENCE OF FLOWERS AND HERBS INTO A FRAGRANT LIQUID THAT STIRS THE SENSES AND QUICKENS THE HEART.

The sweet, vanilla scent of amber, the creamy, linen aroma of white musk, the narcotic floral headiness of jasmine. The scents we choose reflect our inner desires, yet we have surprisingly few words in the English language to describe them. It seems there is more to fragrances than meets the nose.

The claim is not a romantic notion. Smell is ancient and is a sense shared by all living things. Throughout our lives we build associations between scents and emotions and these olfactory memories influence how we respond to the fragrances that scent our lives and the perfumes we choose.

Every day a small fortune is spent as we trial new scents to find 'the one'. Jennifer Aniston loves Prada; Cameron Diaz prefers Brown Thomas's 'Clean'. Our signature scents become part of us, integral to the aura we project. 'There are popular scents that trigger a similar reaction for the majority of people - like chocolate,' says Perfumer and Founder of Histoires de Parfums, Gérald Ghislain. 'But the more complicated the scent, the more different the reactions. If everybody had the same sense of smell, everybody would wear the same perfume.'

'A perfumer is in many ways similar to a Michelin-star chef or a famous musician, in that it is a priceless skill to combine ingredients or notes in new and unconventional ways to create perfumes, dishes or music,' says Huib Maat, Co-founder and Master Perfumer of couture perfume creator Pairfum. Like music, the notes in scented products unfold to the nose over time. Top notes are light, dissipate quickly and are often citrusy, while middle and bottom notes are deeper aromas and are often fruity or woody. The first hint you have of a fragrance is not then the smell that endures.



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While there are a limited number of new materials that come to the market each year, this doesn't mean that there are no new fragrances. Perfumers have a multitude of decisions to make. 'I love the surprise each time you successfully create a formula you imagined, and the alchemy that happens when you mix ingredients; that is always a discovery,' says Laurence Fanuel, a Senior Perfumer for Dutch scent producer PFW, part of the Kelkar Group who are a European-based manufacturer of aroma chemicals that are used in fine fragrances and cosmetics. 'What interests me is how much a scent can evoke an atmosphere, how it can make you travel in a minute far away from where you are.'

The association of scents with travel, whether emotional or physical, is something close to Ghislain's heart. His perfume lines focus on a person, era or place. The new Opera Collection from Histoires de Parfums encapsulates an opera diva, while The Scent of Departure range attempts to capture the essence of a city in a bottle. 'When I create a perfume for a city I want to translate in scent the life of that city. For London, it's a walk in Hyde Park at the end of the afternoon.' To this end, Ghislain incorporated green notes to evoke the park and aquatic notes for the Serpentine (lake), with a hint of citrus fruits as a reference to Earl Grey tea.

Today there are more than 30,000 designer perfumes to choose from and niche fragrances are making a comeback. Brands such as Amouage, Xerjoff and Bois 1920 are reviving the high-quality fine fragrances of the past perfume artisans, combining the finest oils from across the globe. For the truly discerning, commissioning a bespoke scent is the ultimate in luxury, with brands including Guerlain, Cartier and Creed and specialised perfume houses such as Les Senteurs diving into bespoke perfumery.

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Creating a bespoke scent to reflect a personality is a time-consuming process. Haute perfumeries offer consultations with 'their nose' and enquire into personal tastes and desires to uncover your fragrance history. Development cannot be rushed, taking anywhere from six months to two years, though the result is truly unique.

In London, Ormonde Jayne's bespoke concoctions start at about £5,000. Depending on the rarity of the ingredients and the customised bottle design, they can exceed £20,000. Roja Dove, one of the world's most eminent Perfumers, commands upwards of £25,000 for his exotic combinations, which come with a guarantee that no other client will receive exactly the same scent.

Whether bespoke or off the shelf, the emotional appeal of scents varies from person to person depending on the associations they have, though there are also trends in fragrances. Director of Illumens Caroline McCleave has seen scents wax and wane in the popularity stakes over time. 'What is popular for one or two years may then wane and fall from favour, only to become popular again a year or two later,' she says.

'The UK consumer has always liked rich and complex floral fragrances, sophisticated lavender perfumes, fresh marine accords, new citrus notes and spicy fragrances. This has not changed. What however has changed is what each of these perfumes smell like,' suggests Maat.

He goes on to explain that over the last decade 'Cool Water' by Davidoff was the benchmark for all marine or water fragrances, though tastes have changed and today's consumers find the fragrance overly sweet and heavy. The new benchmark is 'Aqua di Gio' for men by Armani.

Maat notes that trends in food, colour and fashion have an influence on developing new perfumes, and sales trends often show clear olfactory directions - Pairfum have noticed an increase in demand for citrus-oriented perfumes in the British market and a leaning towards room fragrances such as rose, violet and orange blossom and what they describe as a gourmand note that combines spices such as cinnamon or clove with foodie notes such as vanilla, caramel or anise.

'I adore fragrance of all types and I always have,' concludes McCleave. 'The motto of Illumens is a Rudyard Kipling quote which says "smells are surer than sights or sounds to make the heart-strings crack", and this is so true. In an instant you can be transported to a different time or place by a scent.'

