



# How to Smell *'interesting'*

Caramel or moist crotch – which would you rather smell of? The answer, as Ingeborg van Lotringen discovers, is not as laughably weird as you'd think >

**S**pun sugar is the bane of my life. As a beauty journalist, you get to open a lot of bottles of fragrance, and nine times out of 10 these days, out comes that blasted note of funfair.

I find it offensive, but in the *Cosmopolitan* office, I am in the minority. Our intern put it best when she described yet another syrupy concoction as “nice... like Britney Spears’ Fantasy [true]. It smells like... perfume.”

Exactly. Like the ubiquitous ‘aquatic’ note that dominated half the perfumes in the ‘90s (think L’Eau D’Issey... you got it), ‘gourmand’ candyfloss (or ethyl maltol, its scent-molecule equivalent) has become the fragrance of our times. That may sound somewhat incongruous when ‘our times’ are mostly punctuated by terrorism, debt, loss and environmental doom, but it’s not an accident. Perfume houses will tell you the public positively *demand*s fragrances of “joy, smiles and freedom” (as Lancôme put it upon launching the cupcakey La Vie Est Belle in 2012) to offset the gloom that is real life. And judging by the way any eau de praline, vanilla or caramel sells by the bucketload, our happy place for a good decade has been pudding.

In itself, that’s not a bad thing. Research has shown that edible scents make men think sexy thoughts (something to do with a similarity between vanilla and mother’s milk – make of that what you will) and give us all a sense of comfort. But as with anything, you can only churn out so many variations on the same theme before senses get numbed

and familiarity starts breeding contempt. And if the most recent contents of my office fragrance crate are anything to go by, that’s what’s beginning to happen in perfume. We may have reached peak candyfloss, my friends. And in its place comes something rather more unsettling...

## Something rotten, something blue

Any perfumer will tell you that the sexiest and most intoxicating scents all have something distinctly rotten at their core. “Anything ‘off’ or even faecal [yep, smells like poo] heightens the sexual aspects of a perfume,” says perfumer Roja Dove. We’re talking notes like civet, musk and castoreum: glandular (including, er, anal) secretions of animals that – don’t fret – are used in synthetic form today. “It’s not like you can actually smell these in a perfume,” says Dove, “but a tiny quantity triggers your brain’s synapses and ignites your animal instincts.” Judging by the appalled

reaction to Dove’s televised nuggets of wisdom from *Gogglebox*’s armchair critics recently, this isn’t a great selling point – but you’d be wrong. Enduring classics such as Guerlain Shalimar, Dior Diorissimo and Bottega Veneta EDT all owe their “mmm, sexy” popularity to subliminal stink. It’s just that you didn’t know it.

And it’s not just animal notes that can stir something within. White flowers like jasmine and tuberose are packed with the molecule indole, which, in high quantities, “smells of a recently used toilet,” says Nick Gilbert of YouTube channel Love To Smell. (This may explain why Laura on the *Cosmopolitan* beauty team deems pure tuberose ‘disgusting.’) “Tropical fruit notes rely on sulphuric compounds that, alone, smell like rotten eggs. Oud (a resinous wood note) smells of a barn or blue cheese at intense levels.” Good lord – why would you go there?! Because, says perfume archivist James Craven of scent emporium Les Senteurs, “your subconscious detection of something ‘nasty’ alerts and heightens your senses, making your response more powerful and emotional. It can make a perfume truly addictive, adding intrigue that will make you want to smell it over and over.” Think of it as the olfactory equivalent of Benedict Cumberbatch: unsettling to behold ▶



at first, but forcing you to do a double take and eventually to deeply appreciate its skewed beauty.

## I want to be special!

This instinctive approach to finding the perfume of your dreams, as opposed to one led by marketing, is just right for a social-media generation intent on self-display, says Dove. “Perfume has become a way to express individuality. Young consumers put far more care into their choice of scent to stand apart from the crowd.” He adds that despite the fact you cannot (yet?) smell scent through a phone screen, the internet has transformed the way we shop for fragrance. “Blogs and websites talk in detail about ingredients and the story behind a fragrance composition, making us all connoisseurs of sorts. The more educated you are, the more open you become to different kinds of scents and the more refined your tastes become.” So an ‘odd’ fragrance, apart from having the ability to make you love it with a passion, puts it out there that you’re clever and unique. And that, apparently, is priceless: sales of niche fragrances costing more than £110 were up 28% in 2015\*.

That’s all well, but faced with an ever-swelling tsunami of scents, it’s hard for most of us not to seek refuge in the familiar. If you want to cheat on your trusty perfume in favour of a lusty affair with a dangerous new one, where do you start? “By letting your head shut up and your nose take over,” says Craven. That means browsing a perfumery at leisure, picking up bottles you might not even like the look of, and enlisting the help of the in-house expert. “Ask for scents they enjoy or find unusual, says Gilbert. “Try not to think of what they remind you of or what might be in it, but how you would describe it. Think of the texture, colour, density, pitch and tone. Use words you have for your other senses. Truly, trust your nose. Do you like it? Yes? Then it’s fantastic.” ♦



# Smell like the future

To help you ease your way into something new, we've identified four future fragrance trends that are a little weird but a lot delicious

### GENTLE ANIMALICS

“Animalic notes are definitely back, but you’ll see them used in a softer, gentler way,” says Gilbert. Wearing these means the closer someone gets, the sexier they’ll find you.

**1 Penhaligon's Luna EDT, £128 for 100ml** As bright as a full moon, it lingers sexily thanks to a base of musk and ambergris (that’s fossilised whale vomit to you and me).

**2 Juliette Has A Gun White Spirit EDP, £200 for 75ml** Crisp and a little disturbing, jasmine, tuberose and synthetic ambergris make for a cocktail that’ll have you hooked.

### PALE PERFUMES

“Transparent, clean, subtle scents are an antidote to the noise of many fragrances,” says Craven. Think vegetal notes or molecules designed to enhance, as opposed to mask, your own personal scent.

**3 Calvin Klein CK2 EDT, £30 for 30ml** Has wasabi (yes, wasabi) and wet cobblestone (yes, wet cobblestone) notes, making for an ‘urban woody fresh’ result.

**4 ZarkoPerfume Molécule 234.58 EDP, £75 for 100ml** Will smell different on everyone, but is always clear, bracing and slightly peppery.

### SAVOURY GOURMAND

Mouthwatering scents needn’t be sweet. “I see gourmands

combining with smoky leather accords to create a savoury-salty note,” says Craven.

**5 Mugler Les Exceptions Cuir Impertinent EDP, £135 for 80ml** Carnal leather with green, aromatic star anise. Weird and wonderful.

**6 Jo Loves Red Truffle 21 EDP, £55 for 50ml** Juicy fig clashes with earthy, fungus-y truffle. A taste more easily acquired than you might think.

### GAUCHE CANDYFLOSS

Can’t be parted from your caramel? New sweet gourmands are adding just a touch of awkwardness to challenge and expand your nostrils – and mind.

**7 DKNY Be Tempted EDP, £37 for 30ml** Violet, myrrh and a ‘devil liquorice’ (whatever that is) make this sugar fix not so innocent.

**8 Dior Poison Girl EDP, £45 for 30ml** Turns the traditional gourmand bittersweet with the help of bitter orange and tonka bean.

OK, these MAY be slightly over the top:

● **Liquides Imaginaires Peau de Bête EDP, £250 for 100ml** Cat’s bottom and BO notes, courtesy of delights such as civet and cumin, present us with “the space between man, saddle and beast”. Phwoar. I actually love it.

● **Roja Parfums Great Britain parfum, £1,250 (not a typo) for 100ml** Industrial amounts of rare, real (not synthetic) ambergris (found washed up on beaches) give this a distinct whiff of wet goat. I always get compliments when I wear it – seriously.

● **Etat Libre d’Orange Sécrétions Magnifiques EDP, £70 for 50ml** “Like blood, sweat, sperm and saliva, it’s an olfactory coitus.” Yeah, and that’s indeed what it smells like. Approach with care.