

Beyond the

When it comes to choosing a scent, asks
Susan Irvine, are we more influenced by the
name on the bottle than the fragrance itself?

Photographs by *Jenny van Sommers*



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ometimes, walking through a perfumery, I long to be blindfolded so as not to be bombarded with brand names and images, able at last to encounter scents simply as smells. We live in a world where we are defined by labels. Whether we're fully conscious of it or not, the food we eat, the area we live in, the fashion we wear, are all the product of living under the pervasive influence of marketing, alongside more subtly signalled social markers. Scent has always been aggressively marketed. But nowadays, the babble has risen to a roar. At times it feels almost as if the fragrances exist as a platform for the marketing, and not the other way around.

The big culprits are the new-wave celebrity fragrances. Kicking off in 2002 with J-Lo's Glow, they have snatched an unprecedented chunk of the market from the fashion and beauty brands that traditionally dominated the scene. The fastest-selling fragrance of last year was One Direction's Our Moment. "Obviously nobody bought it because of the fragrance," says perfume designer Azzi Glasser, "they bought it because it's One Direction." Glasser knows of what she speaks. The brains behind modern classic Agent Provocateur and the new trio of scents from Bella Freud, Glasser also worked with boy band JLS on their own eau de toilette. "It sold out before anyone had smelt it," she says. "The band tweeted it and their followers pre-ordered every bottle."

This, in many ways, is nothing new. Celebrity has always sold scent. Chanel No 5 was successful from the start, but it began to go stratospheric when it became associated with Marilyn Monroe. Chanel is still capitalising on the chemistry of that connection, using vintage Marilyn footage to advertise No 5 last Christmas. But imagine if Marilyn were alive now. She could launch her own fragrance – as today's sex bombs, such as Rihanna and Beyoncé,

have done. A modern Marilyn could tweet shopping commands directly to her followers and – just like the tweenies who love One Direction – they would follow in their droves.

In her book *The Scent of Desire*, psychologist and neuroscientist Dr Rachel Herz writes that both visual clues and language have "powerful and unusual control over odour perception". In one experiment she conducted, test subjects reacted positively or negatively to identical odours depending on whether the odours were given positive or negative names. "In essence," says Herz, "this is creating olfactory illusions." When it comes to scent, we are not led by the nose. Unless we happen to be Chandler Burr. When he created the job of scent critic at *The New York Times*, Burr insisted fragrances be spritzed anonymously on to blotters for him by an assistant, so he could assess them without the intrusion of branding. Now his Untitled Series offers a limited number of customers at American online retailer Lucky Scent the same experience. Every month, subscribers to the Untitled Series are sent a lab bottle adorned with nothing more than a code number. The scent inside the bottle will be one that's already out there. The difference is that there is nothing to tell you whether it is by Prada, Hermès... or Cheryl Cole, until a few weeks later when Burr videos "the reveal". This could be unnerving. What if you always thought you were a Prada kind of a girl, but are about to discover that the true essence of you is Katy Perry's Killer Queen?

Though once you got over the shock, you might actually find it refreshing. It would strip away all the pretension of perfumery, for one thing, and perfume is a world rife with that. (Gift coffret anyone, rather than gift box?) And then, scents are not strictly "by" any fashion house or celebrity anyway. The noses that actually craft them are guns for hire, working across the board for different clients. Let's say you love a prestige scent that's been made by a particular perfumer. Why wouldn't you also love something that she or he had made for a singer or reality star? Even such star perfumers as Francis Kurkdjian, who has his own label, makes scents for others, too. "I am super-open," he tells me. "I can tell different stories for different people like an actor handed a script and told 'play'. I don't feel compromised by working for different brands."

I like this anti-snob attitude. "You're my man, Francis," I think to myself as I lug 30 fragrances to the kitchen table with the

help of my twentysomething goddaughter, Julia. Here, we are going to blind-test 15 celebrity scents by the likes of Nicki Minaj, Rihanna, Justin Bieber and Britney, together with 15 from classic houses and niche labels.

The experiment proves to be a bit of an eye-opener. Or perhaps more of a smack in the face with a twerking doughnut. The celebrity scents are a breed apart, instantly identifiable as "celeb" not just by me but by Julia, too, who cheerfully admits she knows nothing about the subject. And they all smell much the same. Falling into the category known as "gourmand

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orientals", they are perfume's answer to a box of Krispy Kremes, stuffed with fat (stonking musks, big vanilla) and sugar (fake fruits, "candyfloss" chemical) and brightly coloured sprinkles (floral additives), and are likely to bring on olfactory hyperglycaemia in the sensitive sniffer. Oddly, we both have a soft spot for Kim Kardashian's line (sugar-sweet but properly sexy). But Kim apart, it's a celebrity washout. At one point my co-smeller runs from the room gagging and shouting, "There's just too much... too much... *smell* in them!"

Traditionally, younger women buy scent because they want to belong to the "universe" of a designer or celebrity and – as Herz's research has shown – it is women in their forties who seek out a signature scent. After all, being grown-up is about wrenching your identity away from labels and brands and knowing your own mind. There is, however, a subset of young women who are fast catching up with the fortysomethings. Just as social media has enabled celebrities to communicate with their followers, so the burgeoning online

perfume community is creating a cohort of young, knowledgeable consumers with the confidence to choose their fragrance in a more individual way. Through the Perfume Society (Perfumesociety.org), the brainchild of beauty supremo Jo Fairley and former Harrods beauty buyer Lorna McKay, you can major in everything there is to know about perfume via “discovery” boxes of scent samples, events, workshops and their dedicated e-zine, *The Scented Letter*. These are the kind of consumers tapping into the other major trend out there, a trend that is re-shaping and re-energizing the fragrance market and pushing individualism. It’s the rise of the so-called “niche” brands. These fragrances are driving an outpouring of creativity not seen since the golden age of perfumery in the first third of the last century. “I have no doubt that the Opiums and Shalimars of the future will come from the niche brands,” says Liberty’s beauty buyer Sarah Coonan. “It’s about trust. People look to these brands for authenticity, genuine craftsmanship, great quality of ingredients.” Instead of me-too scents, niche brands are about taking creative risks – be it Frédéric Malle, whose visionary Editions de Parfums allows the industry’s most accomplished perfumers to make the scents they want with the quality of ingredients they want, or the wilder questings of Alessandro Gualtieri for his Nasomatto range. To create his latest offering, Blamage, Gualtieri blindfolded himself and picked six ingredients at random from his perfume repertoire, challenging himself to then knit them into a wearable fragrance (it works, in a crazy kind of a way).

Niche scents have changed the way we shop for fragrance, making it a much more made-to-measure experience. Each brand has its own unique point of view, whether it’s Profumi del Forte, an under-the-radar Italian label I love for the quality of its ingredients and quiet clarity, or something more high concept such as Escentric

Molecules, with its bold minimalist approach of putting out scents composed entirely of a single ingredient. Avant-garde as this may be, its Molecule 01, composed solely of aroma-chemical Iso E Super, is “far and away Liberty’s bestselling product,” says Coonan. Liberty has championed brands such as these to become the go-to department store for the niche perfume experience. At its Le Labo counter, customers can choose from a wide menu of ingredient-led fragrances that are



made up fresh there and then and given a custom-made label. Other department stores are also making bold new experiments in retail. Earlier this year, Selfridges went to the heart of the personalised experience with Fragrance Lab. Customers were questioned about their emotions, shopping habits, colour preferences and so on, and journeyed through an installation choosing objects that spoke to them. “One room was all pre-fragranced ceramics,” explains Mark Tranter, Selfridges’ fragrance and beauty buyer. “In another, customers chose an object that said ‘home’ to them. People loved it. They were given a personality

profile and, further to that, a scent customised to reflect their experience in the space.” This approach is so much more fun, more immersive than just rocking up to a counter for the latest blockbuster.

“People are into being individuals again,” agrees Roja Dove, who was instrumental in changing how we shop for scent, opening Harrods’ Haute Parfumerie back in 2004. Here, he began to “curate” a collection of scents before the idea of curating retail goods had come into common parlance or practice. “Haute parfumerie,” he explains, “is the fragrance equivalent of haute couture.” For Dove, it’s all about choosing scents of exceptional quality that had become lost in the noise of big-brand marketing. This autumn the Haute Parfumerie moved to the sixth floor of the store, together with the entire Harrods perfumery – which has migrated from the manic ground floor to become a calmer, more thoughtful destination for scent shoppers, who walk down an “avenue” in a perfumery arcade where each brand has its own specialist mini-store.

“Your own signature perfume can become addictive, the love of your life,” says Azzi Glasser. She is talking about her “secret little club” of celebrities... Not the ones who launch fragrances, but the ones who come to her to have something special made up just for them. She has worked on scents for Helena Bonham Carter, Noomi Rapace and Johnny Depp, who, she tells me, “didn’t wear anything, thought none of it suited him... and then fell in love with his own unique fragrance”. Or, as Francis Kurkdjian puts it, “scent is all about the emotion it gives you”. Indeed, emotions and smells are so akin, that Dr Herz posits emotions as a kind of human evolution of smell itself: “The role that scent plays in the lives of other animals has evolved into the emotional world of humans.”

“When you think you have found ‘the one’, live with it on your skin for a little,” concludes Glasser. “See how it connects with you and the people you love. If you love it and they love it, what other endorsement could you want?” ■