

To The Power of Five

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— Nobody Can Deny, The Power of N°5

A bottle of CHANEL N°5 is sold every thirty seconds – just digest that fact for a second – that means by the end of this sentence, someone, somewhere around the world has bought themselves, or someone they love, a bottle of a fragrance that is as iconic as the Volkswagen Beetle, as timeless as Cartier diamonds and as beautiful as Paris at night. N°5 has been a consistent bestseller since its launch in the 1920s putting it in the unique position of being the scent of many generations – it is our scent, the scent of our mothers and grandmothers – the smell of first dates, goodnight kisses and heart wrenching goodbyes. N°5 is so much more than a perfume, it's a friend that has accompanied us on life's many journeys and it is someone we all know oh so very well.

Writing about CHANEL N°5 is like photographing the Eiffel Tower – others have been there, done that and said all that can be said, snapped all that can be snapped, sniffed all that can be sniffed, even, but still there is a yearning to experience it for oneself and to speak of that experience. CHANEL N°5 is a legend of the perfume world. Scrap that, N°5 is the most famous perfume in the world and when most people think of perfume they think of N°5. So it's

a daunting fragrance to approach as a writer because how could one ever do it justice? For me, N°5 is the elephant in the room – it simply has to be written about. In this piece I'll be celebrating CHANEL's flagship fragrance by taking a look back at its history as well as sniffing its five incarnations, guiding you, Dear Reader, through the fabric of a perfume that can only be called a legend, and even then the description doesn't quite do it justice. This is N°5 to the power of five.



— CHANEL

The creation of N°5 is stuff of legend. According to Tilar J. Mazzeo in her book 'The Secret of Chanel N°5', Coco Chanel wanted to create an "oddly contradictory" perfume, something that was "lush and opulent" but that also "had to smell clean". She is famously quoted as saying "I want to give women an artificial fragrance. I say artificial because it will be fabricated. I want a fragrance that is composed" – a scent that was pieced together in the same way her clothing was. That was Coco Chanel's brief for her flagship fragrance.

Coco Chanel worked with Russian-born perfumer Ernest Beaux to create her debut fragrance, handing him the brief that would result in a game-changing fragrance. Beaux, who was working on experiments with aldehydes at the time, took added inspiration from the polar circle and "the emanations of an indescribable freshness released by the lakes of the northern regions in the midnight sun", creating a perfume composed of flowers, without any one being prominent, and an overdose of aldehydes. The famous story, as we all know, is that Beaux presented Chanel with a number of samples and it was the fifth she chose, with the request that the perfumer add a high quantity of Grasse jasmine. Thus N°5 was born.

So what's actually in N°5? A whole heap of stuff, actually! There are a lot of flowers; predominately, ylang-ylang, Grasse jasmine, rose de mai; the signature aldehydes of course; and a warm base of sandalwood. It's a seamless blend that smells of no one thing in particular – a composition that has been interpreted by CHANEL in numerous ways over the years. Today there are five versions of N°5 on the market – five extractions of the CHANEL DNA, starting with the original Parfum and ending with the brand new L'Eau. Let's sniff.



— N°5 Parfum – For Purists (Ernest Beaux; 1921)

Would you believe that, until i started writing this piece, I had never smelled CHANEL N°5 in its Parfum concentration? Sacrilege, I know! How can I even dare to write about this classic without sniffing it in its intended form? Well, you'll be pleased to know that I have rectified this misdeed of mine and spent some time getting to know N°5 Parfum. So what's it like? Probably one of the very best things I've ever sniffed. The aldehydes in the opening feel like diamond dust, brilliant and sharp. The shock and awe of this initial wave is quickly overwhelmed by round two: the jasmine and may rose symphony – two flowers that come together like a dress pattern, seamlessly to create a new piece. The base is warm, golden light, fur and comfort. No wonder it has lasted nearly a century at the top of the game. This is the N°5 for purists.



— N°5 Eau de Toilette – Stoic Sparkle (Ernest Beaux; 1924)

In 1924, Ernest Beaux revisited his masterpiece to create an Eau de Toilette. It is largely faithful to the Parfum but it feels less sensual and altogether more stoic. The EDT sees N°5 at its soapiest, with the aldehydic sparkle and floral blend smoothly pieced together in a way that gives the impression of skin that has freshly soaked in a fragrant bath oil. Where other concentrations offer a plush bed of sandalwood in the base, the Eau de Toilette feels more austere and drier, with golden woods and vetiver giving a more standoffish feel. This is the N°5 for those that take things a little bit more seriously.



— N°5 Eau de Parfum – The Glamour of N°5 (Jacques Polge; 1986)

N°5 Eau de Parfum came in the mid-1980s under Jacques Polge's tenure and it is the concentration many associate as being 'N°5', due in part to the fact that, for a long time, it has been the only non-parfum concentration to be housed within the iconic rectangular flacon. In the Eau de Parfum, everything about N°5 feels bigger and bolder. The aldehydes are golden and fizz with large bubbles, whilst the jasmine at the heart is thick and syrup-like, and the sandalwood base is creamy and loud. N°5 Eau de Parfum takes the aldehydic floral to full levels of glamourpuss. This is N°5 at its most sparkly, most excessive and most luxurious. This is the N°5 for those that don't believe that there is such a thing as 'too much'.



— N°5 Eau Première – The Entry-Level N°5 (Jacques Polge; 2007)

Eau Première came in 2007 as Jacques Polge's second reworking of CHANEL's grand dame. Created as an 'entry-level' N°5, Eau Première intended to bring a younger audience to the fragrance by the way of something softer and more accessible. Sniffing Eau Première in comparison to the earlier Parfum and Eau de Toilette is like looking at N°5 through a silk curtain – the form of the original can be seen but it's warped into something entirely different. This is the most divergent fragrance of the bunch, with sweeter sparkle up top thanks to sherbet-like citrus, waxy white blooms in the heart and oodles of creamy vanilla in the base. A stripe of vetiver sharpens the focus somewhat, removing N°5's powdery 'vaseline on the lease' blur, making for a composition that is modern but faithful. This is the N°5 for those that think they don't like N°5.



— N°5 L'Eau – N°5 for Today (Olivier Polge; 2016)

L'Eau is the newest kid on the block created by the new CHANEL perfumer on the block, Olivier Polge. It comes with the rather brilliant tagline 'you know me and you don't' – six words that sum up this brand new take on a familiar theme. Smelling N°5 L'Eau is like recognising an old friend at a party, only to realise that the person you see is their daughter. L'Eau shares all of the features you know in N°5, but they've been freshly polished and revived to bring them in line with the fashions of today. L'Eau is N°5, of course, but with its cocktail of citrus in lieu of aldehydes, blousy white flowers instead of heady blooms and musk replacing sandalwood, it is dressed in an entirely new outfit (a CHANEL one, obviously). This is the N°5 for today.



— The Royal Family

Each member of the CHANEL N°5 family shares the same DNA but there are subtle and sometimes even striking differences in their appearance. The Parfum, the matriarch of the family, contains the most concentrated dose of Beaux's craftsmanship, portraying an overdose of aldehydes that whirls dizzily like a Catherine Wheel in full flight. The Eau de Toilette is drier, emphasising the crisper, more starchy aspects of the composition, taking N°5 from boudoir babe to boardroom bitch. In the Eau de Parfum we see a bolder N°5, one that is more exuberant and sensuous with all of its key facets – the aldehydes, flowers and vanilla – pushed to extreme. Eau Première softens things, as repentance for the EDP's '80s binge, cutting through the headiness with citrus and vetiver. Finally, L'Eau strips N°5 back to her boyfriend's white shirt, flirting with lemon juice and musks with a fresher, more current formula.

Each spritz of N°5 in any of its five incarnations is a spritz of history. Every spray tells the story of Coco Chanel, of Ernest Beaux, of aldehydes and of a new dawn in perfumery. There is an undeniable power to N°5, it has survived changes in fashion, tastes and attitudes, reigning over all other fragrances that came after it, many of which were inspired by its olfactory signature or conceptual approach. Today it remains a best seller and whilst some may argue that it is dated, all of the evidence suggests otherwise and to me, N°5 very much smells as current as many of the new scents on the market. N°5 is here to stay and I'm ready to hedge my bets that in 100 years, it'll still be number one.

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