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Features



# The Top Ten Female Designer Fragrances Every Beginner Should Sample



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 31 comments



This title is a bit misleading. The truth is, if you're a woman reading this, then you've probably already sniffed your way through 95% of the stock in your local drugstore, and can therefore hardly be called a "beginner."

Women are inveterate consumers of fragrances, cosmetics, and skincare. We are probably as familiar with the products on offer in the local department store as we are with the contents of our own bathrooms. And because we don't really need to smell good for mating purposes, we have the luxury of pleasing only ourselves.

So we take our time and we test things. We up-end tester bottles, swipe lipsticks on the backs of our hands, beg for samples, lick the strawberry-flavored lipglosses, and generally annoy the living daylights out of the sales associates before we open our wallet.

In fact, you may be sure that any woman plonking down hard-earned cash for [Alien](#) has already methodically worked her way through [Angel](#), [Womanity](#), and [all the flankers on the shelves](#) before honing in on her final choice.

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So this article is kind of like teaching your grandma to suck eggs.

But say you want a more structured guide through the drugstore? It's nice to blindly pick up bottles and spray a little bit, but we only have so much skin real estate to spare. Maybe you already know you love [Chanel No. 19](#) or [Angel](#), but want to explore more in that vein and don't know where to go next.

Maybe you want to know which of the perfumes available to you locally are considered benchmarks or turning points in perfumery.

Or maybe you just want someone to tell you how to separate the wheat from the chaff. God knows, there's an awful lot of chaff. But speaking as someone who for years trawled for gold in a country where niche didn't yet exist, I can tell you that there are fantastic, glorious, *game-changing* examples of perfumery just waiting for you on those shelves. You already know this – you probably already own 50% of the stuff on this list.

This list is just a little reminder that olfactory heaven isn't always a hard-to-find perfume that you have to order from Japan or pay someone to mule back from Paris – sometimes it's just sitting there on the shelves of your local Sephora or dusty, corner-shop pharmacy waiting for you to come by and adopt them. Or already in your collection and waiting for you to gently remove their glasses and free their hair from that bun, and murmur, "Why, Miss Jones, you *are* beautiful."

Oh, and of course, if you're a man, you should try these too, if you haven't already. Most if not all of the fragrances on this list are perfectly unisex and can be worn confidently amongst other manly men. Even Angel.

(Well, maybe not Angel).

Click through to find out which I've selected as the top ten female designer fragrances every beginner should sample:

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## Angel by Thierry Mugler



Smell **Angel** because it is one of perfumery's true innovations. Angel is based on the novel idea of pairing a "female" set of notes with a butch "male" set of notes, thus giving everyone who wears it a little Crying Game-style frisson. On the female side, we have red berries and Ethyl Maltol (a synthetic molecule that smells intensely like candy floss, caramel, and vaporized sugar), and on the male side, a coarse, sour mash of patchouli and coumarin. Witness the birth of what is known in perfume legend as the "fruitchouli".

The overall effect is both sugary-sweet and rotten-smelling, like a damp dishcloth left to mold for weeks in a sink full of caramel. Naturally, it's a real love-hate kind of thing. Like Beyonce and the Atkins Diet, you either think it is the best thing sliced bread (well, maybe not the Atkins people) or completely, utterly vile. What's sure is that Angel changed the face of female perfumery and also the general smell of the high street. In other words, you might not have smelled Angel deliberately, but *you have smelled Angel*.

The formula proved to be so effective – so striking – that it launched endless attempts to copy it or spin it off in some way. In particular, Angel's tremendous success seems to have inspired the female designer market to move wholesale into the business of mainlining sugar into the veins of perfume-wearers. Almost every designer company

dreams of coming up with an “Angel-killer”, hence the proliferation of scents such as [La Vie Est Belle](#) (Lancome), [Flowerbomb](#) (Viktor & Rolf), [Pink Sugar](#) (Aquolina), and [Pink Princess](#) (Vera Wang).

Unfortunately, as [Luca Turin](#) pointed out in his wonderful Guide, most of the perfumes seeking to emulate Angel’s structure leave out an essential part of the puzzle - that coarse honk of patchouli and coumarin that counteracts the sugar – and crank up the dosage of Ethyl Maltol to diabetes-inducing levels.

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In general, if you like Angel, then it’s best to shell out for the original. But if you want to explore further, then you might be interested to know that a handful of niche scents have successfully charted Angel waters without coming off as either derivative or too sweet – try the exuberant [1969 Parfum de Revolte](#) (Histoires de Parfums) for a techni-color peach and patchouli brew, [Visa](#) (Robert Piguet) for its hushed, velvety fruit suede, or [Fruitchouli](#) (Andy Tauer) for an insider-y wink at the whole fad.

On the designer side, [Coco Mademoiselle](#) (Chanel) is perhaps the most famous of the “elegant” fruitchoulis, far more polite than Angel but also a bit too pinkly pretty for its own good. [Lolita Lempicka](#) (Lolita Lempicka) is a worthy challenger to Angel’s crown, though, balancing its sticky cherry caramel with bitter ivy and absinthe, that dark herbalcy standing in for the gruff patchouli-coumarin player in Angel.

If you love Angel, then it’s also likely you have a fondness for **gourmands** – fragrances that fall into the “Eat Me/Don’t Eat Me” category. If you like the chocolate side of Angel, for example, and want to take it straight up, then you might like [Chocolate Greedy](#) (Montale), [Choco Musk](#) (Al Rehab), or [Amour de Cacao](#) (Comptoir Sud Pacifique).

However, straight-up gourmands lack the abstraction of [Angel](#), by which I mean you run the risk of coming off smelling like food. If this is your self-avowed goal, then fine – have at it. There is something to be said for the pleasure of hunting down the perfect pure vanilla, green pepper, or coffee fragrance. But if you're not on one of these nerdy missions, then a more sophisticated option is to go for fragrances that mix in gourmand notes with either a chypre, woody, or oriental base, presenting a more abstract vision of the "yummy" note. In other words, you'll smell delicious but not like dessert.

[Parfumerie Generale](#) is known for doing very good semi-gourmand fragrances, a standout being [Aomassai](#), which smells of roasting hazelnuts and caramel mixed in with smoking resins and green leaves. Other great options to explore include [Like This](#) by Etat Libre d'Orange (whiskey, pumpkin, ginger), [Jeux de Peau](#) by Serge Lutens (toast and butter), [Bois Farine](#) and [Traversee du Bosphore](#) by L'Artisan Parfumeur (rose lokhoum and flour, respectively). [Tonka Imperiale](#) (Guerlain) smells like the palest, creamiest toasted almonds, honey, hay, and tobacco, and were it not for the fact that it costs, like, a gazillion euros, I'd mainline the stuff.

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## Eau des Merveilles by Hermes



Everyone should try [Eau des Merveilles](#) because, in contrast to [Angel](#), it relies on salt rather than sugar to convey its message. Composed by [Ralf Schwieger](#) and [Nathalie Feisthauer](#) and launched in 2004, it is a savory, orange-y woods scent that conjures up the tight crackle of salt crystals on a clean, bare shoulder after a long day at the seaside. It is also an abstract essay on the complex smell of white ambergris, which in

nature smells like the clean, mineral smell of beach rocks and bleached driftwood.

If you like the salt in Eau des Merveilles, then pat yourself on the back, because it is well known that a preference for pretzels over M&Ms is a mark of sophistication. But in general, it is difficult to find salty fragrances that don't also use dreary aquatic notes to round it out. Fragrances that pair naturally salty vetiver root or seaweed with salt do an excellent job of evoking the bracing freshness of seaside air without relying on the repellent melon wateriness of Calone. In this category, [Sel Marin](#) (Heeley Parfums), [Sel de Vetiver](#) (The Different Company), and [Fleurs de Sel](#) (Miller Harris) are standouts. The recent [Wood Sage & Sea Salt](#) (Jo Malone) is also excellent.

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If you find the idea of straight-up sea salt a bit boring, then go *weird*. [Womanity](#) (Thierry Mugler), a fragrance that stresses out my spell-check every time I write it, is a salty caviar-fig with a lactonic undertow that swings between vivid and vomitous. Honestly, I think it's wretched, but it is at least an interesting, ambitious fragrance that tries to do more with salt than putting it at the beach. [Florabellio](#) (Diptyque) employs an odd coffee note to complement the sea salt accord, and based on the principle that coffee has a roasted woody-resinous smell, it works....kind of.

If it's the orangey, woody parts of Eau des Merveilles you prefer over its salt, then also try the original **Eau d'Orange Verte** and **Concentree d'Orange Verte**, both also by Hermes. Or any of their summer colognes, actually – Hermes does fresh in a very elegant way. And if you want to transition from day to night (how nineties!), I don't think it's at all a massive mental leap from Eau des Merveilles to the orange blossom extravaganza that is **24, Fauberg** (Hermes).

# Infusion d'Iris by Prada



I think everyone should have a bottle of [Infusion d'Iris](#) in their collection because it is the white shirt of the perfume world – simple, classy, and always appropriate. It is also a decent alternative to citrus-based colognes during the summer. Green, fresh, and slightly bitter-powdery, Infusion d'Iris gives the feeling of being shower-fresh, even at the end of a long, sweaty day. It is rather light on the iris, admittedly, but contains enough to give you a taste and establish how you feel about the note.

If you like the citrusy, green iris note in Infusion d'Iris, then other options to explore in the same vein include [28 La Pausa](#) (Chanel Les Exclusifs) and [Irisss](#) (Xerjoff). If you have a naturally Calvinist-like disposition, then you will also probably enjoy the sterner, rootier stuff like [Iris Silver Mist](#) (Serge Lutens), [Iris Nazarena](#) (Aedes), and [Iris Cendre](#) (Naomi Goodsir).

Iris, depending on how the material is used, or indeed which material to replicate its scent, can also display violet facets and/or cosmetic or lipstick notes. On the violet side of things, try [Iris de Nuit](#) (Heeley Parfums) and [Iris](#) (Santa Maria Novella). Cosmetics-style irises need to be worn with a knowing wink and a penciled-in beauty spot to really work, but the best of the best include [Misia](#) (Chanel), [Dior Homme](#) (Dior), [Lipstick Rose](#) (Frederic Malle), and [Moulin Rouge](#) (Histoires de Parfums).

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However, you might smell [Infusion d'Iris](#) and think, hmmm, nope, just too much iris for me. No shame in that. Many people prefer to take their irises with a spoonful of sugar to make the medicine go down. The lipsticky irises mentioned above can be a good austerity-workaround, but wrapping the iris up in oriental or gourmand notes also works well.

[Iris Taizo](#) (Parfumerie Generale), for example, frames the iris against a backdrop of honey, juicy figs, and spicy cardamom, which turns the iris into a delicious ingredient that lifts the whole composition rather than dominating the overall smell. [Bois d'Argent](#) (Dior) and [Bois d'Iris](#) (Van Cleef & Arpels) both mix the iris with honey, lactones, myrrh, and driftwood, with the result that the iris is perceived only as a mysterious "silvery" presence that floats eerily through the scent. (I say "scent" not "scents" because to my nose, these are practically the same).

[1996](#) (Byredo) is also another nice option, as is [Shalimar Parfum Initial](#), but already there we are moving back in the direction of the iris-suede of Dior Homme and the fruity-patchouli of Angel.

And of course, if you *do* like the iris in Infusion d'Iris but think it's too light or fleeting, then give the [Infusion d'Iris Absolue](#) version a shot. With a much bigger dose of orris butter and a sturdy tailbone of oriental resins and gums, this version is much stronger, creamier, and smokier than the original.

Finally, testing Infusion d'Iris might make you realize that you like a shy dab of iris here and there but not the whole glistening, earth-covered root. To be honest, barring a few exceptions, I include myself in that group – I like iris but couldn't eat a whole one. If you're nodding your head in agreement right now, then don't try to force a square peg into a round hole and just stick to fragrances that feature iris as a string player and not the soloist, such as [No. 19](#) (iris and galbanum), [Cuir de Russie](#) (iris and leather), [No. 18](#) (iris, rose, and ambrette), and [31 Rue Cambon](#) (iris, patchouli, amber). Yes, all Chanel. Chanel does iris right.

## Chanel No. 5 by Chanel



There's no need for me to describe the smell of **Chanel No. 5** – it's probably as ingrained as deeply in your brain as it is in mine. It is one of those smells that seem to burst into our consciousness as a fully-formed whole. But for those who are fresh to the business of fragrance, you might be wondering if you really need to make a special trip to smell No. 5 when you and everybody else in this world knows what it smells like.

Actually, what it smells like is kind of beside the point. It is such a loaded smelling reference it is impossible to separate the actual notes from the individual whirligig of memories, associations, and emotions it conjures up for each individual. Seriously, if dear old Mum wore it as she kissed you goodnight on her way out to the opera (as big a cliché in fragrance reviews as the cashmere sweater), then how on earth can you talk about its ratio of jasmine to roses, etc.? Right – you can't.

So why is it even on this list? Well, from a technical standpoint, it's there to tell you where you stand on the following two things: abstraction and aldehydes.

Chanel No. 5 is an *abstract* fragrance. That means that, although several fields' worth of jasmine, ylang, neroli, and roses gave up their lives to be encapsulated in this golden, shimmering elixir, it is not possible to pick any one flower out. You don't smell the roses – you smell the blended effect of roses bleeding into other equally indefinably floral notes.

In a way, it's like describing a woman whose beauty moves you – recognizing words

like “small nose” and “full mouth” to be inadequate, you move straight on to general terms such as “glowing” or “Goddess-like.” [Luca Turin](#) called abstraction “the soul of great perfumery” and differentiates between abstract florals and realistic florals (soliflores) by saying that the realistic florals should really only ever be judged by a panel of bees, not humans.

We all need a baseline for our likes and dislikes, and Chanel No. 5 is *the* litmus test for abstraction. If you enjoy No. 5’s abstract floral swirl, then there are other similarly abstract fragrances to scratch the same itch: try the super-sonic floral blitzkrieg that is [Ubar](#) (Amouage), [Joy](#) (Jean Patou), [Madame Rochas](#) (Rochas), [Gold Woman](#) (Amouage), [Nocturnes](#) (Caron), [1000](#) (Jean Patou), and [Dia Woman](#) (Amouage). Fragrances that closely mirror the actual smell and texture (aldehydes) of No. 5 are [No. 22](#) (Chanel) and [Baghari](#) (Robert Piguet).

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But if you dislike the blurred lines of No. 5 and prefer jasmine to smell like jasmine, rose to smell of rose, and so on, then that’s a useful thing to know about yourself. There is a whole world of soliflores out there for you to explore.

Space does not permit a thorough exploration, here but the following are standouts in their respective floral categories and good places to start: [Carnal Flower](#) (Frederic Malle) for tuberose, [La Violette](#) (Annick Goutal) for violets, [Iris Silver Mist](#) (Serge Lutens) for iris, [Jardenia](#) (JAR) for gardenia, [A La Nuit](#) (Serge Lutens) or [Jasmin Full](#) (Montale) for jasmine, [Une Rose](#) (Frederic Malle) for rose, and [Gold](#) (Donna Karan) for lily.

Also, try to smell [Joy](#) (Jean Patou), another symphonic, rich-beyond-belief floral composition with enough indoles and civet to give you a thrill. The only reason Joy doesn’t make it into a category of its own is because it is best smelled in the pure

parfum, and that's not as widely available to everyone. The modern EDP is much lighter than the parfum, and according to Luca Turin, appears to be an entirely different composition to the parfum, using lighter qualities of jasmine and roses.

Now, **aldehydes**. Contrary to common belief, No. 5 was not the first fragrance to use aldehydes, nor was it the first to use synthetics. However, it was the first to utilize a string of fatty aldehydes in the following order: **C10, C11, and C12**, creating a "fizzing champagne" effect and an aroma that shifts between roses, soap, wax, and orange peel. When No. 5 was a hit, other perfumers used the same sequence when building their own aldehydic florals.

Aldehydes are one of the great dividers of the perfume world – you're either a fan and can't get enough of them or you can't get them off you quick enough. If you love them and want more in the same vein, try **Arpege** (Lanvin), **White Linen** (Estee Lauder), **La Myrrhe** (Serge Lutens), **Baghari** (Robert Piguet), **Iris Poudre** (Frederic Malle), and possibly the most aldehyde-stuffed fragrance ever, **No. 22** (Chanel). Naturally, if you're aldehyde-averse, avoid these scents at all costs.

It would be remiss of me not to mention one of the most successful modernizations of a classic scent ever seen, and that is the beautiful **No. 5 Eau Premiere** (Chanel). This edited version of the original No. 5 turns the volume down on the soapy aldehydes and up on the sparkle of citrus, creating a lemon-jasmine champagne cup of a perfume that is a pleasure to wear.

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## Bottega Veneta EDP by Bottega Veneta



I'm including [Bottega Veneta EDP](#) on this list because it is a perfume that proves that designer brands can make beautiful, subtle fragrances and people will still buy them. Also, for a designer fragrance, it is admirably sugar-free.

Rather like the famous intrecciato handbag upon which it is based, Bottega Veneta is a smooth suede fragrance that weaves together strands of plum, jasmine, and patchouli. It has the same milky bitterness one gets from good suede or light leather fragrances such as [Daim Blond](#) (Serge Lutens), which it resembles slightly. But Bottega Veneta is far more robust and therefore sexier.

If you like [Bottega Veneta EDP](#), then it's likely that you will like other soft, fine floral leather and suede fragrances too. Another standout is [Cuir de Lancome](#) (Lancome), a smoky, saffron-led leather fragrance - once the best deal you could find online at the discounters and now increasingly difficult to find at reasonable prices. Try a [popular auction site](#) for this one. [Donna Karan Signature](#) (Donna Karan) is also great, a muffled osmanthus suede with a sexy oriental drydown.

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For even greater choice, drift upstream to niche. [Cuir Ottoman](#) (Parfum d' Empire) is a beautiful oriental leather fragrance with a markedly soft, irisy side to it. [Cuir X](#) (La Parfumerie Moderne) is similar to Cuir Ottoman, but cut free of the creamy oriental bits - streamlined and hot to trot. If you want a side of suede rather than a whole serving, then try the fruity, lokhoum-inspired [Traversee du Bosphore](#) (L'Artisan Parfumeur) or the exuberantly fruity and violey [I Miss Violet](#) (The Different Company), both of which contain a beautifully dusty suede in the base notes.

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## Chanel No. 19



Brrrr, it's *cold* in here – there must be some **No. 19** in the *atmosphere*! Combing the cut-glass, vegetal pungency of galbanum with an equally chill iris root, **No. 19** is the driest of the green florals. Although some find it standoffish, one must give it props for being the Chanel with the most distinctive personality. Cool, green, and *wry* somehow, it is no wonder that so many women (and men) choose it to project an aura of confidence in a business setting. Reformulation has attenuated both the fierceness of its galbanum (thank you, Iranian Revolution!) and the leather in the base notes, but **No. 19** still smells reasonably like itself.

If you've tried **No. 19** and liked it, then it's likely that you like the greener notes used in perfumery, such as galbanum, hyacinth, lily-of-the-valley, calamus, artemisia, violet leaf, and green tea. Seek out fragrances that use these notes. Other green florals and green-dominated fragrances include **Chamade** (Guerlain), **Vent Vert** (Balmain), **Futur** (Robert Piguet), **Cristalle** (Chanel), **Eau de Campagne** (Sisley), **Givenchy III** (Givenchy Les Parfums Mythiques), **Metal** (Paco Rabanne), **Ninfeo Mio** (Annick Goutal), **Le Temps d'Une Fete** and **Odalisque** (Patricia de Nicolai), **Baiser Volé** (Cartier), **Tiare** (Ormonde Jayne), **Eau Parfumée Au The Vert** (Bvlgari), and **Bel Respiro** (Chanel).

If you like green but find **No. 19** too "pointy elbows" for you, then try **Heure Exquise** (Annick Goutal), which is a softer take on the **No. 19** theme and gives you the pleasant "out" of a creamy sandalwood and vanilla in the base. Also try **No. 19 Poudre** (Chanel), which removes much of the grass-like greenery of the original and replaces it with a bigger dose of iris, soap, and a powdery musk. In smell and texture, **No. 19 Poudre** sits halfway between **Infusion d'Iris** (Prada) and **Ivoire** (Balmain).

If you prefer your green florals cut with sweeter yellow or white floral notes, then fragrances based on the use of **narcissus** (daffodils) are a good way to go. Narcissus has a heady aroma that combines the cut-grass sharpness of No. 19's green notes with the pollen-rich, earthy fecundity of daffodils - a compromise between the primness of green and the sluttiness of yellow.

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Narcissus is what softens the galbanum in [Vol de Nuit](#) (Guerlain), for example, and also what gives the topnotes that rather surprising burst of animalism. Excellent modern narcissus-based fragrances include [Le Temps d'Une Fete](#) (Patricia de Nicolai), [Ostara](#) (Penhaligon's), [Au Dela Narcisse des Montaignes](#) (Bruno Fazzolari), and [Romanza](#) (Masque Franze).

Thus far, I've been really pedantic – if you like the galbanum in No. 19, try this, if you like the iris, try that, and so on. But what about fragrances that approximate the overall *feel* of No. 19 rather than variations on its notes? Perfumes that scream “power top” as effectively as the menschy No. 19 itself include [Aliage](#) (Estee Lauder), [Silences](#) (Jacomo), [Iris Bleu Gris](#) (Maitre Parfumeur et Gantier), [Sycomore](#) (Chanel), [Private Collection](#) (Estee Lauder), and [Yatagan](#) (Caron). All green-grey in tone, austere, and dry to the point of smokiness, wearing any one of these scents is like cracking a whip on someone's bare backside. (I'd imagine).

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## Mitsouko by Guerlain



Everyone should make an effort to smell **Mitsouko**, because (a) it is an endlessly fascinating perfume, bringing something new to the surface with each wear, and (b) once you smell Mitsouko, you understand what a **chypre** smells like.

The term "chypre" seems to be a rather fluid one these days. Technically, in order to be classified as a chypre, a fragrance should contain bergamot, labdanum, and oakmoss. But you could drive yourself crazy trying to sort perfumes into chypre and non-chypre categories, checking off notes lists, and so on.

In general, the nose can recognize a chypre right away, and that's because of the recognizable balance of sweet and bitter. In its entirety, a chypre should smell like a perfectly balanced Chinese meal tastes, with the bitterness and saltiness of oakmoss contrasting the brightness of the citrus, and the ambery base softening and sweetening the final "taste".

In other words, a fragrance can smell like a chypre to your nose even if it doesn't contain all three chypre notes, because as long as it gets that salt-sweet-bitter balance right, it's done its job as a chypre. It's a useful litmus test in this day and age when the use of oakmoss is restricted by the extraordinarily self-patrolling "elf and safety" experts at IFRA, who are, I imagine, the same people who inserted the "Do not eat iPod Shuffle" clause in the Apple instruction manual.

Some perfumers are turning towards the use of low-atranol oakmoss (atranol being the molecule to which IFRA objects) but some creatively use other materials such as patchouli and algae to replace the inky, salty feel of oakmoss.

The extent to which these new oakmoss-free chypres are successful in achieving that

mossy, bitter chypre feel varies wildly. [31 Rue Cambon](#) (Chanel), for example, is not technically a chypre because it doesn't contain oakmoss. But nonetheless, it smells like a chypre because the iris-patchouli combination provides enough of that bitter effect to take its place. You smell it and you think "Chypre." Likewise, [Agent Provocateur](#) (Agent Provocateur), [Perle de Mousse](#) (Ann Gerard), [Golden Chypre](#) (Grossmith), and [Chypre Mousse](#) (Oriza L. Legrand) all possess the requisite inky "forest floor" bitterness to be deemed chypres.

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Other so-called "new chypres", on the other hand, are clearly faking it. [Memoir Woman](#) (Amouage), for example, is classified as a chypre but smells more like a plummy morning-after-the-night-before oriental in the same category as [Poison](#) (Dior) or [Fendi](#) (Fendi). And to call [Narciso Rodriguez for Her](#) (Narciso Rodriguez) or [Coco Mademoiselle](#) (Chanel) a chypre – pink or otherwise – is just plain wrong.

Anyway, let me not get my panties in a twist. There are still some incredible chypres in production. Indeed, it's kind of difficult to justify crying hot tears over the disappearance of [Parure](#) (Guerlain) while the superior [Mitsouko](#) is still being produced. Mitsouko has been reformulated, of course, in keeping with changing IFRA and EU restrictions, but it is still very good – excellent, in fact, if we are talking about the recent EDP and pure parfum (2013 onwards).

If you don't know [Mitsouko](#), then what does it smell like? It is kind of hard to describe, because it is an abstract smell and seems to behave differently on the skin every time one puts it on. To me, it mostly smells like yeasty dough, peanut oil, floor wax, unripe peaches, spices, mulled wine, closed-in places, and musty closets - basically all the bitter, dusty inedible things you thought were gross when you were a kid and now find oddly appealing as an adult.

**Mitsouko** is technically a fruity chypre. If you get along with this touch of fruit, then try the resinous, animalic **Jubilation 25** (Amouage) for an orientalized take on the genre, the current **Femme** (Rochas), a softer Mitsouko with more fruit, cumin, and skank, and **Shangri-La** (Hiram Green), which takes the earthy, dusty skeleton of a chypre and fleshes it out with indolic jasmine and juicy, dripping peaches.

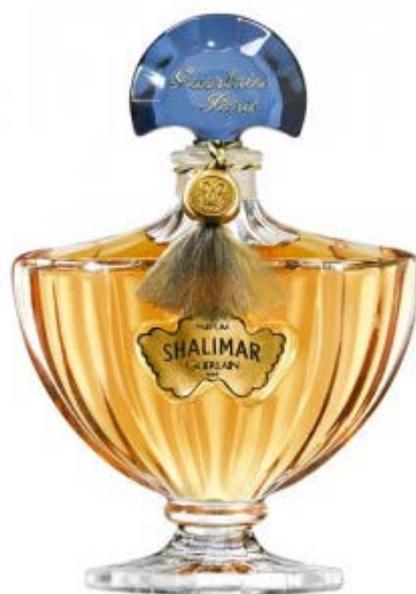
Moving away from sensual stone fruit and towards fresh green notes such as bergamot and radiant jasmine notes (hedione), we have the quintessentially French fruity chypres such as **Diorella** (Dior), **Cristalle** (Chanel), **Eau Sauvage** (Dior), **Vie de Chateau Intense** (Patricia de Nicolai) and **Le Parfum de Therese** (Frederic Malle). Oakmoss reformulation has affected some of these examples, so make sure you really love the current version before investing \$\$\$.

If you like the chypre smell but could do without the fruit, then there are many other flavors of chypre to suit your tastes. Luca Turin mentions in *The Guide* that the pillars of the chypre structure are intrinsically suited to adaptation – one can move the same three pieces of furniture around a room to achieve different effects.

If you like green notes, try green chypres such as **Aliage** (Estee Lauder), **Miss Dior** (Dior), and **Givenchy III** (Givenchy Les Parfums Mythiques). If it's leather that floats your boat, give **Bandit** (Robert Piguet) and **Jolie Madame** (Balmain) a try. Rose lovers should try **Knowing** (Estee Lauder), **Rose de Nuit** (Serge Lutens), **Une Rose Chypree** (Andy Tauer), and **Soir de Lune** (Sisley). Fans of earthy, foresty smells like patchouli, resins, and herbs should cozy up to the perennial classic that is **Aromatics Elixir** (Clinique), as well as its close siblings **La Perla Classic** (La Perla) and **Noir Patchouli** (Histoires de Parfums).

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## Shalimar by Guerlain



In the oriental category, it's difficult to move five steps left or right without bumping into a perfume that owes at least part of its bone structure to **Shalimar**. It is the progenitor of oriental fragrances featuring any one or combination of the following:

- Smoky vanilla
- Amber
- Powdery texture (iris)
- A clash between a citrusy (bergamot) top and vanillic base
- Herbal-smelling balsams and resins like oppopanax
- Creamy tonka-sandalwood combinations
- Civet and musk

I am not sure if the original itself can be improved upon - Shalimar is the perfect marriage between smoke (resins), cream (vanilla), flowers (jasmine, iris), animalics (musk, civet), and aromatics (bergamot, herbs). It smells as lush and as sexy as ever, even in today's slightly cleaned-up version.

But some people just can't get along with it. The most common complaints are that it (a) smells like dirty baby powder, (b) has a "curdled cream" effect when the dry, bright bergamot clashes with the creamy vanilla, (c) smells disturbingly like rubber tires on fire, and (d) is too feminine, powdery, and old-fashioned for a guy to wear.

Although I personally don't subscribe to any of those opinions, I agree that it takes a little time for a modern nose to get used to Shalimar. It could be that we have grown accustomed to simpler, less abstract fragrances. But try Shalimar, and then keep on trying - give it a week or two of continuous wearing. Even if you end up not liking it, you will at least come to understand how it is built. And from there, you can examine

all other oriental fragrances and understand how they are built too, and what if anything they owe to Big Momma Shalimar.

If you do end up loving Shalimar and want more in that vein, then the following fragrances are all, to varying degrees, declensions of the original: [Musc Ravageur](#) (Frederic Malle), [Fate Woman](#) (Amouage), [Iris Taizo](#) (Parfumerie Generale), [Opoanax Imperiale](#) (Les Nereides), [Ciel de Gum](#) (Maison Francis Kurkdijan), [Bijou Romantique](#) (Etat Libre d'Orange), [Opus 1144](#) (UNUM), [Felanilla](#) (Parfumerie Generale), [Fils de Dieu](#) (Etat Libre d'Orange), [Ambre 114](#) (Histoires de Parfums), [Bulgari Black](#) (Bulgari), [Fleur Oriental](#) (Miller Harris), [Angelique Encens](#) (Creed), [Ambre Sultan](#) (Serge Lutens), [Spiritueuse Double Vanille](#) (Guerlain), [Rêve Indien](#) (Fragonard), [Jasmin de Nuit](#) (The Different Company), [Lei](#) (Mazzolari), and [Labdanum 18](#) (Le Labo).

Phew. As you can see, Shalimar has those child-bearing hips for a reason.

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To my mind, there are two separate classes of oriental fragrances – those that follow the [Shalimar](#) mold (creamy, vanillic, ambery, sweet) and those that follow the [Opium](#) mold (resinous, spicy, aromatic, with *bitter/sour* flavors). The first group seems to be alkaline and the second acid.

For example, people who like Shalimar may also like other orientals with a similarly sweet, creamy, rosy-woody “mouthfeel” to them, like [Habanita](#) (Molinard), which is still great post-reformulation and the best €40 you can spend in your local department store, [Bois des Iles](#) (Chanel Les Exclusifs), [Vanisia](#) (Creed), [Parfum Sacre](#) (Caron), [L'Heure Bleue](#) and [Samsara](#) (Guerlain), and [Farnesiana](#) (Caron). Lots of emphasis here on textures poised between cream and powder, drawn-out drydowns of unctuous amber, sandalwood, and vanilla, and gentle flowers like heliotrope and orange

blossom rounding out the heart.

Oriental like **Opium** (Yves Saint Laurent) and **Coco** (Chanel) are not vanillic, creamy, or sweet – they are packed with hot spices, bitter balsams, orange peel, dry pomander-style woods. They smolder and unsettle rather than caress. Other spicy, dry orientals in this vein include **Maharanih** (Patricia de Nicolai), **Noir Epices** (Frederic Malle), **Eau Lente** (Dyptique), **Nanban** (Arquiste), and **Egoiste** (Chanel).

If you're interested in finding a bridge between these two categories, then perhaps try **Vanille Tonka** (Patricia de Nicolai) which, despite the name, is a smoky carnation scent that puts the modern version of **Bellodgia** (Caron) to shame. It also has the acidity of lime and a fresh, lemony frankincense to lift it out of the creamy, comforting oriental category. Towards the base, a creamy tonka and vanilla duo blurs the lines somewhat.

Another fragrance that successfully straddles creamy and sour/acid is **Epic Woman** (Amouage). There is a mouth-puckeringly tart oud wood note in Epic Woman that reminds me of pickles or umeboshi plums, an effect also present to a certain extent in **Plum Japonais** (Tom Ford Private Blends) and **Nu EDP** (Yves Saint Laurent). All three perfumes are smoky incense orientals with a phenomenally sour streak of flavor running through them that prickle the saliva glands. Only Epic Woman, though, ends up in a creamy vanillic base, planting one foot firmly in the Shalimar camp.

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## Insolence EDP by Guerlain



I'm including **Insolence EDP** on this list because it is a very good example of what a

modern Guerlain smells like (as opposed to the two classics on this list, Shalimar and Mitsouko). Insolence EDP is a fun, irreverent, and delightfully trashy paean to two of Guerlain's great fragrances, [L'Heure Bleue](#) and [Apres L'Ondee](#).

[L'Heure Bleue](#), parent number one, is a French pastry groaning with almond paste and candied violets, and dusted with heliotrope icing sugar. [Apres L'Ondee](#), parent number two, is handfuls of dewy iris petals and violets pressed into the pages of a book by the same children who photographed fairies at the bottom of their garden in Cottingley.

Enter its offspring, [Insolence EDP](#). Its luridly sweet red berries, candied violets, and creamy tonka is a hurried pastiche of [L'Heure Bleue](#), and she has her other parent's patrician iris nose. But she also wears a too-short bomber jacket and low-slung jeans, calculated to flash her tramp stamp at the marauding hordes of teenage boys at the mall as she sashays past, the human equivalent of a mare "winking" when in heat. No class – but so what? She's absolutely gorgeous. If you want a screeching hiss of hairspray on top of all that, then [get the EDT](#).

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Insolence is useful to smell because it very much typifies the modern trend in designer perfumery to front-load a perfume with all the exciting notes crammed into the first 30 minutes to an hour, operating under the same "fallacious stacking" principle as Wonder Bra. So, at first Insolence is very loud, very sweet, and completely over the top. If young people are buying based on topnotes, then I don't blame anyone who flips out over the crude gorgeousness of Insolence in her first wind. The opening is as piercing and exciting as a mating call. Unfortunately, everything kind of deflates when the Wonder Bra comes off in the basenotes. They really don't build 'em like they used to.

If you love the smell of Insolence but wish it could sustain itself more sturdily in the

base, then **Love in Black** (Creed) and **Opus III** (Amouage) are similar in feel but more richly fleshed-out.

However, in keeping with Luca Turin's categorization of Insolence as a "Godzilla floral", I will recommend some perfumes that are equally as loud, sweet, over-the-top or *excessive* in some way. **Angel** (Thierry Mugler) of course, but also **Alien** (Thierry Mugler), **Juicy Couture** (Juicy Couture), **Rush** (Gucci), **Black Orchid** (Tom Ford), **Casmir** (Chopard), **Le Parfum** (Elie Saab), **Fracas** (Robert Piguet), Organza (Givenchy), **Hypnotic Poison** (Dior), and **Truth or Dare** (Madonna). God, even **Amarige** (Givenchy) while we're at it. Just be aware that these are *not* perfumes that speak with their indoor voices.

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## Narciso Rodriguez for Her EDT



Sometimes you just can't beat the straightforward sexiness of a good musk fragrance. **Narciso Rodriguez For Her EDT** (Narciso Rodriguez) is great because it combines a fairly clean musk with smutty orange blossoms, thus walking that whole "clean-dirty" tightrope with perfect balance.

This is a simple but effective fragrance. Spray it on and suddenly your attractiveness is increased by the power of 10, you find yourself walking like Marilyn Monroe, and all the old men at the bar start sizing up the child-bearing capacity of your hips. The

white musk purrs in your ear, “Hey, you. My mother just scrubbed me down with a bar of soap and butter wouldn’t melt in my mouth. Come sit next to me.” But then those indolic, syrupy orange blossoms pipe up and they’re all, “Hey, you. Me duuurrrty.”

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Other musks that walk the tightrope between clean and dirty are [Musc Nomade](#) (Annick Goutal), [Kiehl’s Original Musk](#) (Kiehl’s), and [Helmut Lang EDP](#) (Helmut Lang), which all do indecent things to innocent flowers but then stop and smile innocently when you look at them straight in the eye. [Musc Tonkin](#) (Parfum d’Empire) fell off the tightrope early on, and [Salome](#) (Papillon Perfumes) never even bothered to get on – they are both pretty filthy and probably need their bottoms smacked. If you can find [Bal a Versailles](#) (Jean Desprez) or [Femme](#) (Rochas) in your environs, spray them with gay abandon – this will tell you pretty quickly where your limits for cuminy skank lie.

If you like the clean-dirty ambiguity of Narciso Rodriguez for Her, then it stands to reason you might also like floral fragrances that combine fresh flowers with hints of corruption, decay, and death. Seek out the ambiguously fecund-but-also-moribund [Une Fleur de Cassie](#) (Frederic Malle), the fleshy [Charogne](#) (Etat Libre d’Orange), the furry [Diorella](#) (Dior), the archly nasty [Boudoir](#) (Vivienne Westwood), the sweaty-powdery [Putain des Palaces](#) (Etat Libre d’Orange), the inner-thigh-like [Amaranthine](#) (Penhaligon’s), and the sour bra-sweat of [Dans Tes Bras](#) (Frederic Malle).

*So, what do you think? Would you add anything to this list or take something off?*