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Features



The Top Ten Niche Fragrances Every Beginner Should Sample



by **Claire Vukcevic**

13th January, 2016

47 comments



First of all, despite the word “should” in the title, this is by no means a prescriptive article. If you’re just starting out and feel like making your own merry way through genres, notes, houses, etc., and at your own pace, then feel free to ignore this.

But for some, a roadmap is useful. If you want to cut straight to the good stuff, without wasting too much money, then think of this article as an older sister putting her hand on your shoulder and telling you which boys to steer clear of at the local nightclub. Only less condescending (hopefully).

Sample first, unless you have money to burn and are keen to build your collection all in one go. A bit of blind buying goes with the territory, of course, and we’ve all done it – but at least sample the major categories first so that you’re not working completely in the dark.

I’ve chosen to start with a list of the top ten niche perfumes, but a list of must-sniff designer fragrances is up next. Niche doesn’t necessarily smell better than designer, but there are some differences. In general, niche caters to a long tail of tastes and

quirks, no matter how obscure, whereas designer fragrances have to be made to appeal to a broader audience. But there are probably an equal number of masterpieces in the designer segment (historically) as in the niche sector. Let your nose be the final judge.

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A word on how I've selected these ten fragrances:

First, they must be a good representative of a genre, a trend, a single note, or a style, and allow you to make a decision whether or not to further explore the genre. Hopefully, you'll discover a bit of your own taste in the process – you love leather, but you can't stand tonka, and so on. Each of the scents I've named open doors onto other scents you might like in a similar vein – or if you hate it, then at least you know to head off in the opposite direction.

Second, all of the fragrances I've chosen can be sampled easily through the big e-tailers such as Luckyscent, First in Fragrance, Decantshop, or Essenza Nobile. Access to niche fragrances is an issue for all of us who don't live in or near a major city, so easy ordering over the Internet is key here. If a scent is brilliant but so obscure or discontinued as to be impossible to obtain (Norma Kamali Incense, let's say, or one of the By Killian Russia exclusives), then it isn't included here. You're going to fall in love with so many expensive, hard-to-get scents on your fragrance journey anyway that I really shouldn't add to your misery.

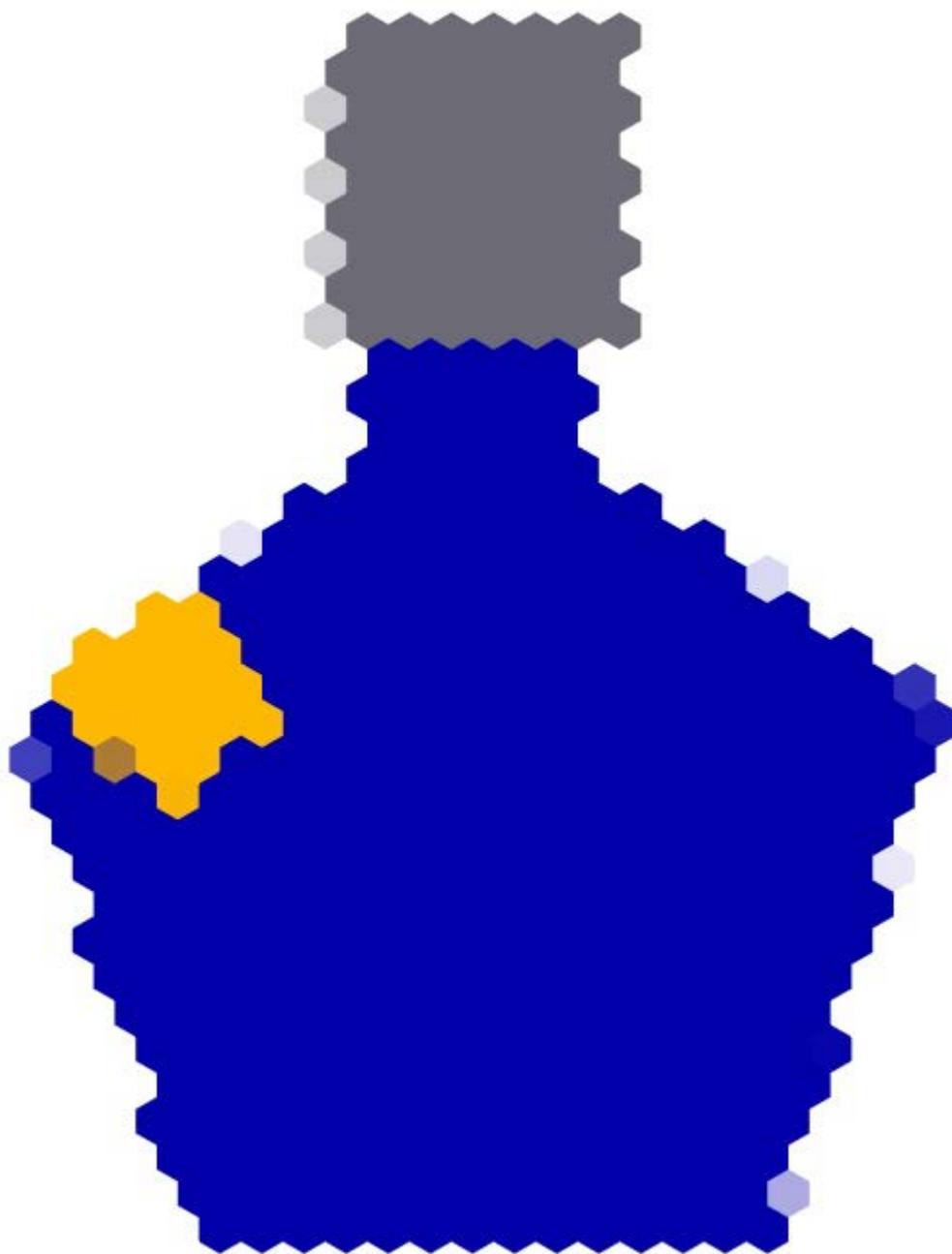
Lastly, all the perfumes I mention are completely UNISEX. Like Luca Turin says in *The Guide*, as far as he knows, fragrance has no genitalia (and that guy knows what he's talking about).

Clicking on the fragrance links will lead you to the directory pages, where you can

read more information and find stockists of where to buy.

Ok, in no order of preference at all, here are the top ten niche fragrances that every beginner should sample. (Click NEXT to begin...)

L'Air du Desert Marocain by Tauer Perfumes



[L'Air du Desert Marocain](#) (or LADDM for short) is a smoky resin scent so dry that it crackles like paper in the heat. An intoxicating brew of ambergris, labdanum, cedar, and coriander seeds, there is no other fragrance that smells remotely like it or possesses its power to transport you to an arid desert landscape. It's an evocative

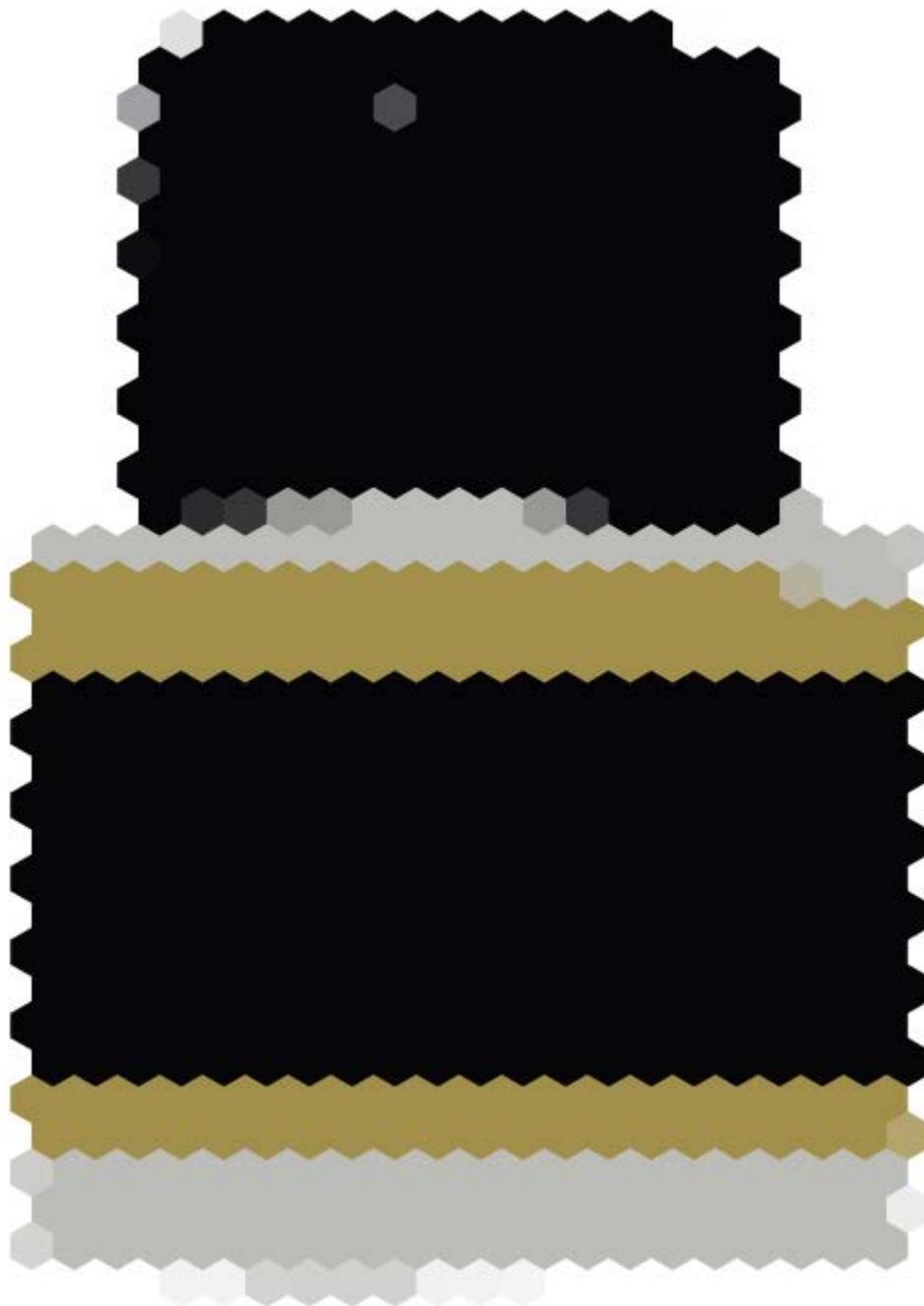
masterpiece, and for many, the ultimate gateway to niche perfumery.

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LADDM will tell you where your preference lies when it comes to amber and resin scents in general. If you like the almost harsh, dry smoke of LADDM, then you might also enjoy [Ambre Fetiche](#) (Annick Goutal) and [Balsamo della Mecca](#) (La Via del Profumo). If you want more richness or sweetness than dryness in your amber, you could look at [Ambre Sultan](#) (Serge Lutens), [Amber Absolute](#) (Tom Ford), [Ambre Precieux](#) (Maitre Parfumeur et Gantier), and [Ambre 114](#) (Histoires de Parfums). Either way, LADDM should tell you the degree to which you enjoy sweetness and moisture (or the lack of thereof) in your amber, and that's always a good thing to know.

L'Air du desert Marocain is available from [LuckyScent](#)

Musc Ravageur by Les Editions de Parfums Frederic Malle



Musc Ravageur is a creamy, vanillic musk oriental that mimics the broad outlines of its ancestor, the great **Shalimar** (Guerlain). It is rich, sweet, rather animalic to begin with, and like **Shalimar**, contains a base of tonka, woods, vanilla, and musk that lingers on the skin for days. George Clooney reportedly wears it. (Although I'm pretty sure he doesn't need any help in the seduction department).

If you like it, then it's safe to say that you like dirty, creamy orientals with a big dose of vanilla, tonka or amber in the base. In that case, even if you're a man, give **Habanita** (Molinard), **Shalimar** (Guerlain), or even **Opus 1144** by UNUM a try – you might find an affinity for them. If it's the dry-but-rich, full-throated vanilla in **Musc Ravageur** you like the most, then head in the direction of **Vanille** (Mona di Orio) or

[Tobacco Vanille](#) (Tom Ford). If you absolutely *hate* the cloves and lavender in Musc Ravaguer, try [Meharees](#) (L'Erborario) instead, as it lacks the cloves of Musc Ravaguer (as well as, regrettably, its rich musk, natural feel, and overall luxuriousness).

Fragrances close in feel and texture to Musc Ravaguer, but slightly less animalic, are [Helmut Lang EDP](#) (Helmut Lang) and [Labdanum 18](#) (Le Labo).

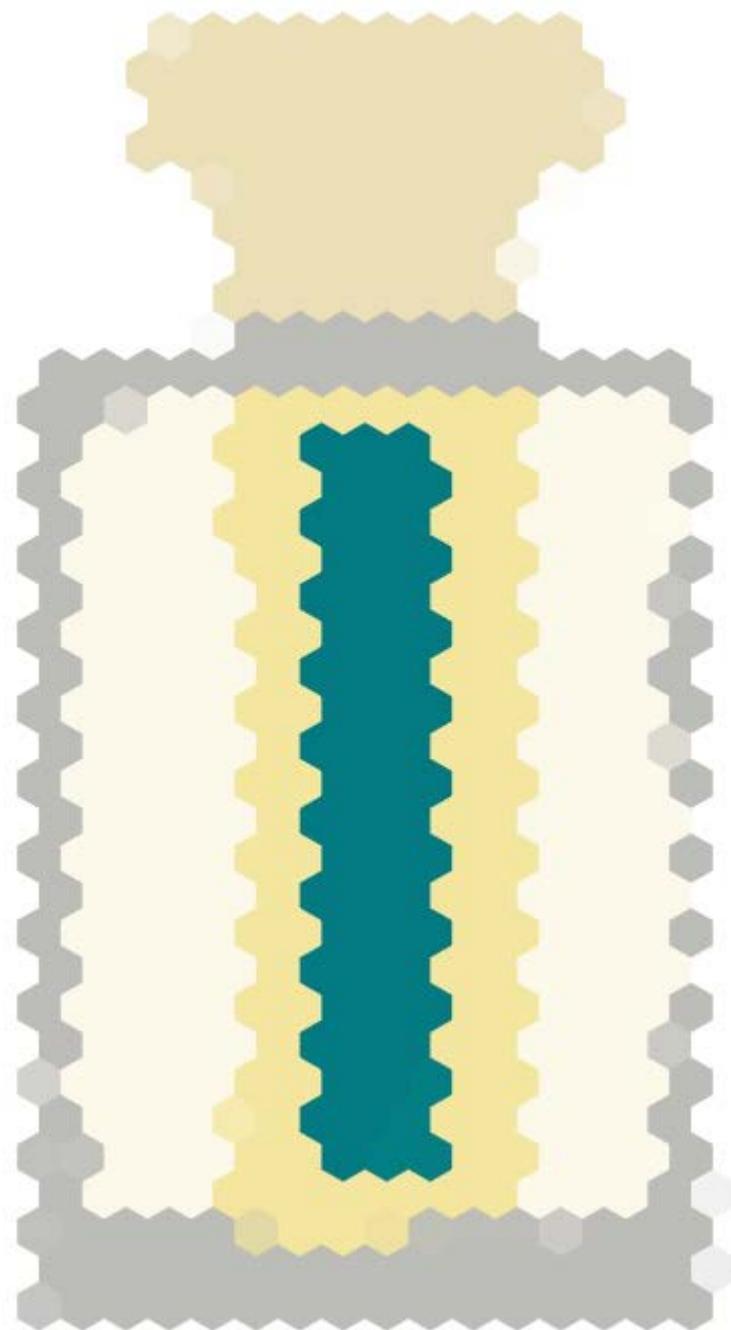
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Most importantly, Musc Ravaguer will test your tolerance for musk. The musk in this is quite dirty, but it only remains dirty for a brief time. If you can stand it, or even like it, and are intrigued, then your next port of call would be [Muscs Khoublai Khan](#) (Serge Lutens) and [Musc Tonkin](#) (Parfums d'Empire), both of which are pretty filthy.

If you find the musk in Musc Ravaguer too dirty, then it could be that you prefer the whiter, cleaner musk side of things (and no shame in that). [Clair de Musc](#) (Serge Lutens), [Musc](#) (Mona di Orio), and [White Musk](#) (Jovan) are the whitest of the white. Or, if you prefer something more in the middle – neither hyper-clean nor pungently dirty – then also try [Musc Nomade](#) (Annick Goutal), [Musc for Her EDT](#) (Narciso Rodriguez), or [Original Musk](#) (Kiehl's).

Musc Ravaguer is available from [Liberty](#)

Timbuktu by L'Artisan Parfumeur



[Timbuktu](#) is worth testing because it has come to represent a sort of halfway point in [Betrand Duchaufour's](#) career, perched between the bone-dry, smoky, pared-down woods and incense accords he had developed for [Comme des Garçons](#) in the early 2000's and the full-on, opulent orientalist fantasies based on fruit, incense, booze, and oud that he developed later on for [Amouage](#) and [Neela Vermeire](#). Timbuktu was the first time Duchaufour had used cypril oil to infuse the perfume with an aura of dry, transparent smoke and enormous radiance.

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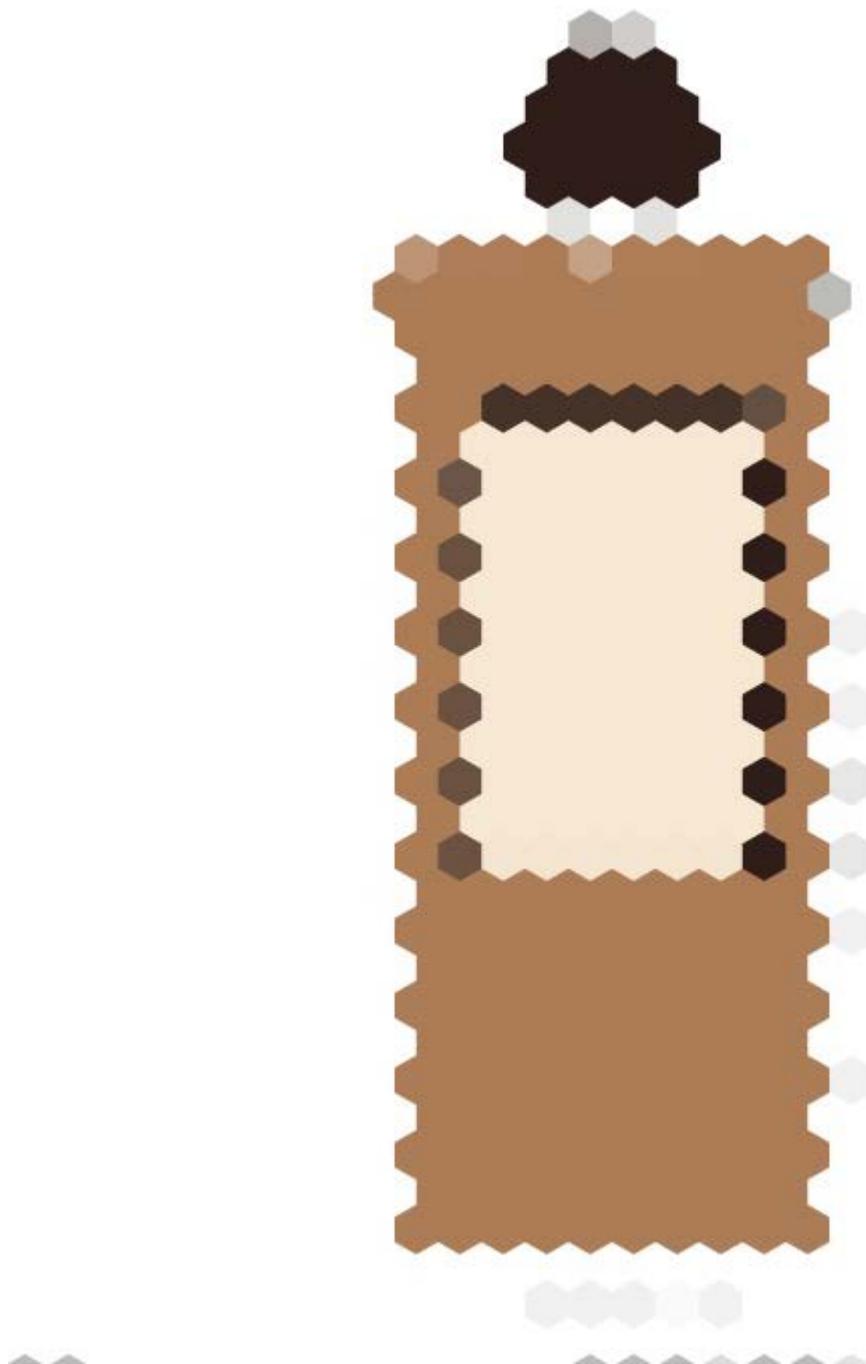
Timbuktu is smoky and dry, but it contains a hint of the exotic fruit Duchaufour would build on for the amazing [Jubilation XXV](#) (Amouage). So if Timbuktu is too dry or plain for you, proceed gaily and without a backward glance to Jubilation XXV, which really is only a vajazzled Timbuktu. If you like the dry, cold smoky woods and incense in Timbuktu, but would like it better with a shot of weird (specifically, peony hotel soap, tea, and burning rubber), then by all means try [Dzonghka](#) (L'Artisan Parfumeur).

If you'd like to try more in this sparse, ultra-pared-down smoky style, then get a sample of [Man 2](#) (Comme des Garçons), which, although by Mark Buxton, is very similar in style to Duchaufour's early work. [Shaal Nur](#) (Etro) is also worth a try because it folds the smoky vetiver/incense qualities of cypriol oil into a woody, herb-strewn Mediterranean structure, rendering it the sun to Timbuktu's chilly darkness.

Timbuktu is also a vetiver-forward perfume, so if you think it's vetiver that you like in Timbuktu, then you might try exploring some other earthy, dry vetiver scents such as [Encre Noir](#) (Lalique) or [Sycomore](#) (Les Exclusifs de Chanel).

Timbuktu is available from [LuckyScent](#), [Harrods](#)

Chergui by Serge Lutens



Chergui is considered to be one of the more accessible niche fragrances out there, so it's no surprise that it is often cited as people's introduction to niche perfumery in general. Like LADDM, it is a gateway fragrance, but despite sharing a similar "desert air" theme, Chergui is miles apart from LADDM in terms of feel, smell, and atmosphere. Essentially, Chergui is a sweet hay oriental built around a tonka-coumarin base. Tonka bean, of which coumarin is the main component, is a marvelous material that gives off a whole host of enticing aromas ranging from sweet, sun-baked hay, honey, cherries, pipe tobacco, to vanilla mixed with cocoa powder.

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Moist and sweet, Chergui will tell you how you feel about tonka and how it is used in perfumery. If you like it, and have no problem with the level of sweetness, then you will likely also like other tonka-tobacco-honey-vanilla orientals such as [Tobacco Vanille](#) (Tom Ford), [Fève Delicieuse](#) (Dior Privee), [Pure Havane](#) (Thierry Mugler), [Ambre Narguile](#) (Hermes Hermessences), [Spiritueuse Double Vanille](#) (Guerlain,) and [Tonka Imperiale](#) (Guerlain). And if you like these fragrances, then you are ok with gourmand fragrances or scents that employ a gourmand take on non-edible notes such as tobacco, musk, and amber.

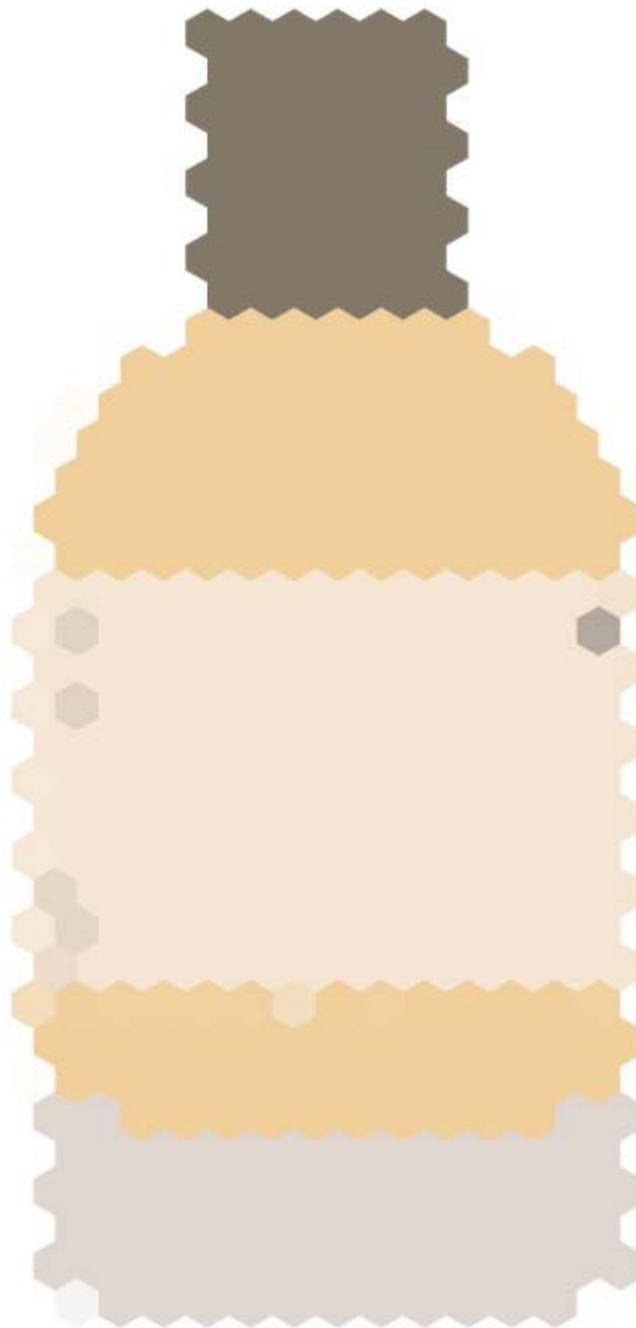
Or perhaps you'll love the tobacco in [Chergui](#) but despise the sweetness of the tonka and ambery base, in which case I'd advise you to sample a less adorned tobacco leaf fragrance such as [Tabac Aurea](#) (Sonoma Scent Studio). If you love the tobacco feel of Chergui but were hoping for something a little smokier, not to mention heavier on the actual tobacco, then [Fumerie Turque](#) (Serge Lutens) is the next logical step. If you want to pursue the newly-mown hay aspect of Chergui but without the sweetness, look at the aromatic, green hay fragrances on offer such as [Vie de Chateau Intense](#) (Parfums de Patricia de Nicolai), [L'Eau de Merzhin](#) (Anatole Lebreton), or [Bois Blond](#) (Parfumerie Generale).

Maybe you will discover that you like tonka bean but prefer a more aromatic, fresher take on the note, in which case, something like [Fourreau Noir](#) (Serge Lutens), [Vetiver Tonka](#) (Hermes Hermessences), or [Allure Homme Sport Eau Extreme](#) (Chanel) might be right down your alley – these perfumes lighten the heft of tonka with aromatic materials such as lavender, vetiver, and citrus.

If you think that the sweet, gourmand, "cherry pie" aspects of Chergui just don't go far enough for your taste, try [L'Homme Ideal](#) (Guerlain), or even abandon tonka altogether and go right to the cherry-almond fragrances that feature heliotrope, of which there is a plethora (chief among them Etro [Heliotrope](#), Caron's [Farnesiana](#) pure parfum, Serge Lutens' [Rahat Loukhom](#), and Guerlain's [L'Heure Bleue](#)).

Chergui is available from [Perfume.com](#), [LuckyScent](#)

Le Labo Patchouli 24



[Patchouli 24](#) smells like the backdraft from a fire in a heavy chemicals factory, sweetened slightly with a thin vanilla syrup. It's a towering masterpiece – but it's not for everyone. If you like the smell of black smoke pouring into your face, then you'll love Patchouli 24 and likely as not you will love other phenolic (burning smell)

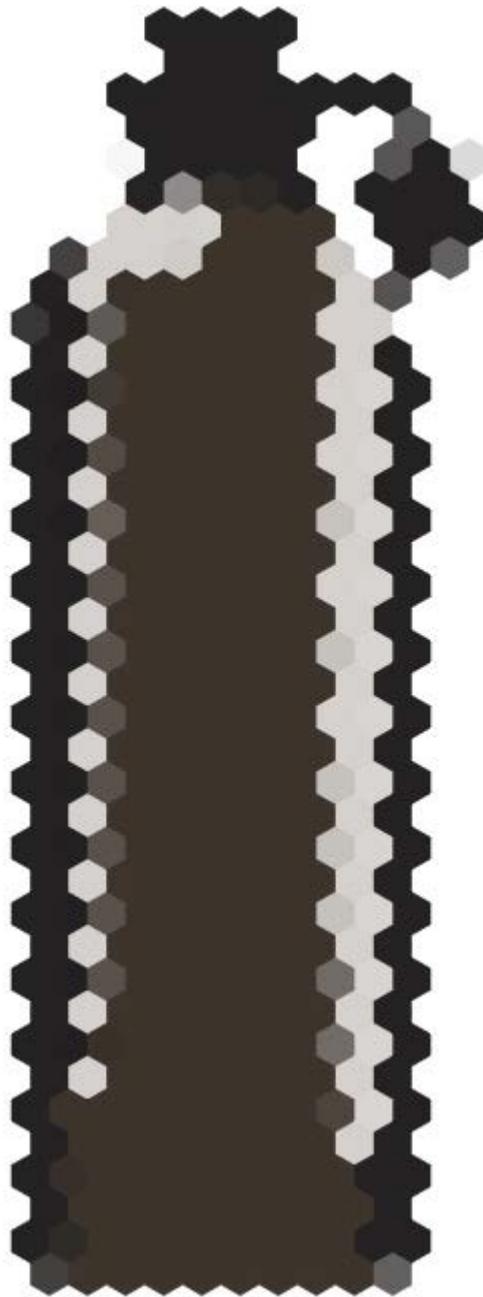
fragrances too, such as the even more hardcore [Cuir6](#) (Pekji Perfumes) and [Jeke](#) (Slumberhouse). I'd normally suggest [Tribute](#) (Amouage) here, but, well, see rule number 2 above about recommending discontinued or rare fragrances. But if Patchouli 24 is too thickly smoky for you, you might want a more toned-down version of it – something slightly more sheer – and this would be [Black](#) (Comme des Garçons).

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If you like the smoke of Patchouli 24 but want more evolution, more mystery, and less...*violence*, then the opulent but dry-as-hell [Memoir Man](#) (Amouage) is your best bet. If you lean more towards the “charred barbequed meat” accord that provides much of the smoke in Patchouli 24, then take comfort in the fact that there is a myriad of burned, almost meaty leather scents to satisfy your craving. Start with [Lonestar Memories](#) (Tauer Perfumes), which has a memorable creosote note to go with its buttless chaps, and move on to the castoreum-driven [Cuir](#) (Mona di Orio), perhaps ending up with oud variation in the form of [Aoud Cuir d'Arabie](#) (Montale), although arguably this last one is perhaps less about the smoke and more about stale, melting plastic and overripe sheep cheese.

Patchouli 24 is available from [LuckyScent](#)

Black Aoud by Montale



Montale's Black Aoud is likely the progenitor of all the Western rose-oud scents on the market, so it's a good place to start. If you like the high-pitched, rubbery, medicinal whine of the Montale oud, then you're in luck, because that's pretty much the same oud accord you're going to encounter throughout most of the Western-style oud fragrances based on the scent of oud oil (but not actually containing the real oil). And if you like the basic Montale oud, then you have 599 other Montale perfumes from which to choose. I'm partial to the Red and White variants myself.

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For a glimpse at the more complex character of real oud oil, [Pure Oud](#), or even better [Extreme Oud](#) (By Killian) is said to be the closest synthetic reproduction of it on the market today. The Oud Moods series done by Francis Kurkdijan for his eponymous house, especially [Oud Cashmere Mood](#) and [Oud Velvet Mood](#), is truly excellent and representative of the complexity of genuine oud oil. If the scent of oud oil, as reproduced synthetically in Western perfumes, is not to your taste, then try a fragrance based on the scent of oud wood chips being burned on a burner, such as the smoky, animalic [Leather Oud](#) (Dior Privée), [Oud Palao](#) (Diptyque), or [Oud Wood](#) (Tom Ford).

Of course, you *could* smell Black Aoud and be blown away by the rose in it. Rose is traditionally paired with oud so that its sweet roundness can smooth down the harsh roughness of the oud. If it's the masculine-leaning rose in Black Aoud that is what you like, then I recommend testing [Portrait of a Lady](#) (Frederic Malle) because it is a rich, smoky rose oriental that feels darkly oud-y without containing any actual oud. Other "masculine" roses (for which read totally unisex in reality but containing dark, earthy notes that men feel more comfortable wearing with their roses) include [Lumiere Noire Pour Homme](#) (Maison Francis Kurkdijan), [Rose 31](#) (Le Labo), [Rose D'Homme](#) (Parfums de Rosine), [Noir de Noir](#) (Tom Ford), [Voleur de Roses](#) (L'Artisan Parfumeur), and [Lyric Man](#) (Amouage).

For women (and men who are unafraid of stepping outside of gender boundaries when it comes to scent), here are some must-try rose scents for every taste, occasion, and budget:

- Lush, rose oriental: [Lyric Woman](#) (Amouage)
- Cheap and cheerful rose and vanilla: [Tocade](#) (Rochas)
- Straight-up green rose: [Sa Majeste La Rose](#) (Serge Lutens)
- Myrrh rose: [Parfum Sacre](#) (Caron)
- Smoky oriental-ambery rose: [Calligraphy Rose](#) (Aramis)
- Rose chypre: [Rose de Nuit](#) (Serge Lutens), [Une Rose Chyprée](#) (Tauer Perfumes)

- Tobacco rose: [PHI Une Rose de Kandahar](#) (Tauer Perfumes)

Black Aoud is available from [LuckyScent](#)

Absolue Pour Le Soir (Maison Francis Kurkdijan)



A warm balsamic fragrance featuring rose, honey, incense, benzoin, ylang-ylang, cumin, Atlas cedar, and sandalwood, [Absolue Pour Le Soir](#) is Francis Kurkdijan's response to critics who say that he is only capable of producing smooth, glossy, oh-so-perfectly-tucked-in scents. APLS is animalic, rich, stinky, and deep, with a fur-like

feel to it that evokes civet-rich perfumes from a more glorious past. Although it is beautiful, there is nothing shy or pretty about it. This is a fragrance that will test your tolerance of animalic fragrances and define your path forward from that point on (or allow you to beat a dignified retreat, because you might absolutely hate it...)

If you love APLS, then look into testing other famous stinkers such as [Salome](#) (Papillon), [Femme](#) (Rochas), [Jubilation 25](#) (Amouage), [Kouros](#) (Yves Saint Laurent), [La Nuit](#) (Paco Rabanne), [Maai](#) (Bogue Profumo), [Al Oudh](#) (L'Artisan Parfumeur), [Muscs Khoublai Khan](#) (Serge Lutens), [Musk Tonkin](#) (Parfums d'Empire), [Nuit Noire](#) (Mona di Orio), and [Onda EDP](#) (Vero Profumo).

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Along the way, you'll discover which of the animalic essences you prefer, be it honey, civet, cumin, ambergris, musk, castoreum, or hyrax. At some point, you'll be such an old hand at the ould animalics that you'll exclaim at regular intervals that Muscs Khoublai Khan is nothing but a cuddly little kitten and argue your case that APLS is the logical next step for sixteen-year-old girls seeking to graduate from [Kim Kardashian's Pure Honey](#).

Absolue Pour Le Soir is available from [LuckyScent](#), [Liberty](#)

Avignon by Comme des Garçons



Avignon separates not so much the men from the boys as the Catholics from the non-Catholics. It's the standard bearer for the church incense type of smell, based around a straight-forward frankincense accord that just smells plain good, no matter how you slice it. Smoky, sweet, austere, and soaring, Avignon can't be bettered for its straight-forward depiction of the scent of High Mass.

Of course, the extent to which you respond to Avignon emotionally will depend on the extent to which you are familiar with (and have positive memories of) Catholic rituals. Even some Catholics can appreciate the smell of straight-up frankincense without wanting to wear it, but for many, it is comforting and spiritual. If you like Avignon, you might also like the other High Mass perfumes, namely **Cardinal** (Heeley), **Full**

[Incense](#) (Montale), [Bois d'Encens](#) (Armani Privé), and [LAVS](#) (UNUM).

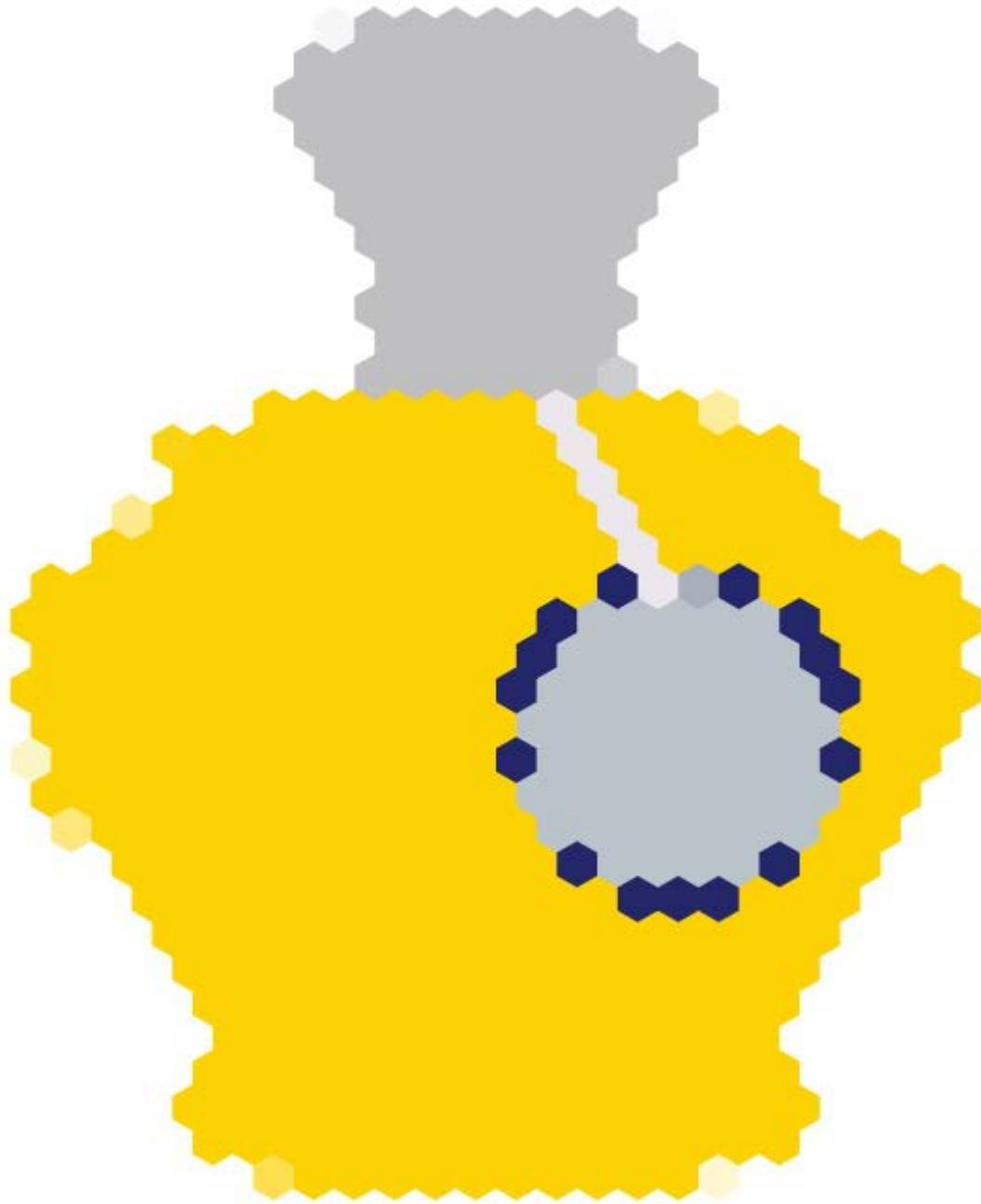
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If pure High Mass is not your thing, but you find you like incense, then look into scents that focus on other smoky resins such as labdanum, myrrh, Peru balsam, tolu balsam, copal, opoponax, benzoin, and elemi, as well as sweet amber accords or even gourmand aspects to keep things non-devotional. Some great examples of single note resin perfumes would be [Eau Lente](#) by Diptyque (opoponax), [Myrrhe Ardente](#) by Annick Goutal (myrrh), and [Tolu](#) by Ormonde Jayne (tolu balsam).

From single note-focused incense fragrances, it's a short skip and a jump to the smoky incense scents that mix amber, leather, and woods with several different types of resins and balsams, such as [Sahara Noir](#) (Tom Ford), [Black Tourmaline](#) (Olivier Durbano), [Fireside Intense](#) and [Incense Pure](#) (Sonoma Scent Studio), [Balsamo della Mecca](#) (La Via del Profumo), and [Sombre Negra](#) (Yosh), all of which rely on charred woods, labdanum, and frankincense for their "Dark Materials" feel and somber, smoky mood.

Avignon is available from [LuckyScent](#)

Onda Voile d'Extrait by Vero Profumo



I am specifically recommending the [Voile d'Extrait](#) because it is cheaper to sample and more legible (to a beginner's nose) than the [original extrait](#). Everyone should try Onda because it is slightly challenging and even weird, and we all need to try a scent that challenges us at first so that we can keep coming back to it, over and again, to see whether our nose understands it better with time and experience.

Onda smells like nothing else, and only you can decide for yourself if that's a plus or a minus. It smells like harsh, dried vetiver paired with a dry, almost urinous honey note. Wild forests, toilets, and brackish water have also been mentioned. Fragrances like Onda seem to exist as calibration devices for our noses and our tastes – the scent itself never changes, but our perception of it surely does.

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Other “calibrating” scents to test are: [M/Mink](#) (Byredo), [Secretions Magnifiques](#) (Etat Libre d’Orange), [Guerilla 1](#) (Comme des Garçons), [Mercury](#) (Nu Be), and [The Breath of God](#) (Lush). These scents are not immediately pleasing to the nose, and smell of non-perfumey materials such as sperm, blood, metal, meat, and ink. You might love these scents or you might retch and declare them vile – but either way, they make you have a reaction, and even as you are reacting, you are thinking about the scent and how it makes you feel rather than simply wearing it to smell fragrant. And that’s when you know you’re treating perfumery as an art form rather than an extension of your daily grooming ritual.

Onda Voile d’Extrait is available from [LuckyScent](#)

Knize Ten by Knize



Knize Ten is a hyper-masculine, gasoline-driven floral leather and a bellwether in the leather class of scents – smell it and you will understand more clearly where your own leather preferences lie. If Knize Ten is too oily and tough for you, then explore the more classic soapy floral leathers such as Chanel’s tour-de-force, **Cuir de Russie**, or a modern, powdered equivalent, such as **Cuir Ottoman** (Parfum d’Empire). But if Knize Ten smells just about perfect to you, then also test similarly tough (but florals-driven) leather scents such as **Cuir Mauresque** (Serge Lutens), **Cuir Cannage** (Dior Privee), **L’Eau Scandaleuse** (Anatole Lebreton), **Royal English Leather** (Creed), **Gomma** (Etro), and **Homme** (Xeroff).

Upon testing Knize ten, you might make gagging sounds and realize that the softer,

finer *cuirs* and suede fragrances are more your style. Excellent examples of soft leathers and suedes include the following: [Cuir d'Ange](#) (Hermes Hermessences), [Cuir Pleine Fleur](#) (Heeley), [Bottega Veneta EDP for Women](#) (Bottega Veneta), [Daim Blond](#) (Serge Lutens), [Boxeuses](#) (Serge Lutens), and [Cuir Beluga](#) (Guerlain). These fragrances all use a variety of fresh, moist notes like plum, violet leaf, apricot, osmanthus, violet petals, or amber to soften the fine leather or suede accords, and are as far away from the tannery as is possible to get.

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If you love, love, *love* leather, then do yourself a favor and get your nose on some of the most sumptuous and gout-inducingly rich leather perfumes in existence today, which are the stupendous [1740 Marquis de Sade](#) (Histoires de Parfums), [Fetish Parfum Pour Homme](#) (Roja Dove Parfums), and [M](#) (Puredistance). Stout to the point of corpulence, these perfumes represent the “private club” corner of the leather world, and boast price tags to match. Whether they’re worth it is a private matter between you and your nose, but you should definitely order a sample.

Everyone has a leather, and it’s just a question of finding yours. Knize Ten is the perfect point of reference.

Knize Ten is available from [LuckyScent](#)

What are your suggestions for the top niche fragrances every beginner should try? Let us know in the comments...

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