

Art of perfumery

Exposing the Perfumer

What it means to be a perfumer in the information age and the need to communicate with consumers

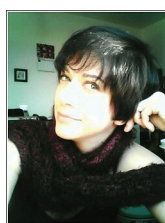
Michelle Krell Kydd

According to *Merriam-Webster's* online dictionary, a perfumer is defined as "one who makes or sells perfumes." This rather simplistic definition, circa 1580, offers no insight into what a perfumer actually does. Twenty years ago, it was off to the library if you wanted to know anything more than what a dictionary or *Encyclopedia Britannica* would tell you, but today, both professionals and hobbyists can turn to Web sites like that of Project Gutenberg—www.gutenberg.org—to download *The Art of Perfumery* by George William Septimus Piesse, or www.amazon.com to look for used copies of William Irving Kaufman's *Perfume*. Presently, true atelier methods and the structured form of perfumery education are not public knowledge. As more information on fine fragrances and raw materials becomes public on the Internet, people want to know more about the creators behind their favorite fragrances. Not all of the information available online is accurate, which affects perceptions offline, leaching into other media, such as print. It is time for the industry to take the reigns and bring perfumers into the limelight.

What a perfumer does has always been a mystery to consumers, according to perfumer Jean Pierre Subrenat, organizer of the World Perfumery Congress and owner of Creative Concepts. "Our job has always been an obscure and misunderstood one, and the consumer cannot decide if we are chemists, alchemists or just witch doctors. All of this is due to a lack of communication and exposure. Real perfumers go through long and rigorous training that lasts at least 10 years. One cannot be a self-declared perfumer just because they are able to blend a couple of essential oils ... [otherwise] everyone who cooks or burns a steak is a three-star Michelin chef!"

A growing number of fragrance crafters, most without traditional training, are studying many of the old texts and collecting books such as Stephen Arctander's *Perfume and Flavor Materials of Natural Origins*—the same book used by professional perfumers. In virtual communities, enthusiasts avidly explore the history of fragrance and raw materials, sharing

personal stories about what they have learned and discussing fragrances they have made for themselves or friends. There is an ethos that surrounds these groups that is highly personal, something one does not find in a department or specialty store. A rejection of synthetics is part of that culture for members of the Artisan Natural Perfumer's Guild, founded by author Mandy Aftel. Members favor the purity and beauty of naturals, speaking about raw materials with the same enthusiasm that chocolate lovers have when discussing the organoleptic properties of their favorite varietals. It's not about fashion or brands to these creators and consumers—it is about the relationship they have with knowledge, crafted scents and raw materials.



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Perfumer Defined

The meaning of the word *perfumer* was precious to Givaudan perfumer Jean Carles, who found the lack of a standard in olfactive training quite maddening. Carles developed a system of study, creating two distinct charts that organized raw materials by similarity and contrast, one for naturals and one for synthetics. (See example charts in **T-1** and **T-2**, and learn how perfumers train from them by reading "Using the Jean Carles Method.")

The Fragrance Conversation Online

Here are just some of the numerous Web sources for perfumery discussion, education and debate:

Download *The Art of Perfumery* by George William Septimus Piesse at:

www.gutenberg.org/etext/16378

Natural Perfumery:

www.artisannaturalperfumers.org (Mandy Aftel's Artisan Natural Perfumer's Guild)

<http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/NaturalPerfumery>

Perfumery Discussion and Blogs:

www.boisdejasmin.typepad.com

<http://nowsmellthis.blogharbor.com>

www.perfumesmellinthings.blogspot.com

www.scentzilla.com

www.leffingwell.com/perfume.htm

www.PerfumerFlavorist.com

The method, which bears his name, is an industry standard used by all professional perfumers and was practically olfactive apocrypha to people outside the fragrance business until enthusiasts started telling each other about William Irving Kaufman's *Perfume*. Carles also founded Givaudan's Perfumery School in 1946, when it was part of Roure. Jean Guichard, who is currently director of the Perfumery School, is proud of that legacy and adds that, "one-third of fine fragrance creators working in the business today are graduates of the school." These graduates include Jacques Polge (Chanel), Jean-Claude Ellena (Hermès), Calice Becker and Françoise Caron, among others.

For Guichard, the boundaries regarding who is and isn't a perfumer are clear—just because someone can smell well and is adept at mixing accords does not make him/her a perfumer. "Mixing raw materials for fun and creating interesting accords is creative and promising, but a perfumer needs real [perfume] bases, real knowledge and real experience. Can we call someone a chef if he takes pleasure in cooking and mixing flavors at home? Can we call someone an oenologue if he likes to drink wine, and appreciate it? Can someone be called an artist if he enjoys painting? I think [enjoyment] is not enough. Hobby and profession are two different things. In a hobby there are mainly nice facets. In a profession there are a lot of frustrations that stimulate your creativity [and lead to new discoveries]."

Guidance and training: The incomplete definition of a perfumer offered by *Merriam-Webster* supports the assumption that selling perfumes alone makes one a perfumer. Acceptance of that definition dilutes the hard work and effort that goes into traditional training, to Subrenat's point, which not only means attendance at an established perfumery school for three to four years, but five or more years of apprenticeship under an experienced perfumer, whose skill and know-how help a junior perfumer grow into a seasoned one. When Givaudan perfumer Yann Vasnier refers to Françoise Caron, he does so with loving respect for his *maitre parfumeur* (master perfumer), the experienced professional who trained him.

A master perfumer can provide the kind of nurturing that one cannot get from reading books or participating in the virtual world of the Internet. Carlos Benaim, a senior perfumer at International Flavors and Fragrances (IFF), says that, "for each mod made, there are at least 50 mods behind [it]," a fact that makes a threshold for rejection and tweaking an absolute requirement of the job of a perfumer. Benaim reminisces about his early days at IFF, under the tutelage of Ernest Shiftan, and is pleased that his company follows the historic atelier model that was in effect when he began his career at IFF.

Emotional connection to scent: There are standards in every profession, but the sensorial nature of fragrance creation brings a great deal of emotion to the table. Our identity as individuals is based in part

on how we arrange our recollections, and scent is the ultimate evoker of memories. There is no wrong answer when it comes to how someone *feels* about what they experience with their senses. Understanding this is quite a revelation to some who don't work in flavors and fragrances.

Combine the physiological and psychological aspects of smelling with information that can be found on the Internet and it is easy to see how misunderstandings can occur. There isn't a universal editor working to make sure that all Web content is accurate—there are millions of fiefdoms. This unleashes tremendous virtual creativity, but it can also leave a trail of invisible snake oil between Internet users and their computer screens.

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The Rise of Self-trained “Perfumers”

Should one consider the rise in self-trained fragrance crafters alarming? The answer is maybe. The movement is a natural response to department store ennui, a dearth of genuine olfactive and sensorial educational initiatives and the over-celebritized flankerization of fine fragrance. In addition, there is a legacy aspect among enthusiasts, similar to the one that perfumery schools and programs promote, based on fragrance history and the idea of learning something from others who possess knowledge. There is, however, cause for debate, as in 2006, *Allure*, *Cosmopolitan* and *O, The Oprah Magazine* gave crafters and oil mixers ink as “perfumers.” This is a reminder that the definition of a perfumer may not be clear to beauty editors, writers or the public.*

*Magazine articles that refer to untraditionally trained fragrance creators as “perfumers”:

L Van Gelder, The Scent Renegades. *Allure*, October, 298–303 (2006).

Your Sexiest Scent Revealed. *Cosmopolitan*, November, 87–90 (2006).

C Burr, What Is That Fragrance You're Wearing. *O, The Oprah Magazine*, November, 165–170 (2006).

The path to clarification of who is and isn't a perfumer will require that the client side of the industry get more comfortable with putting a public face on perfumers, and educating their respective marketing and communications staff with regard to the science behind the sense of smell. This is a long-term project for the industry, but one that has been slowly building momentum. In 2004, IFF Perfumer Carlos Benaim was included at the in-store launch of *Prada* at Saks Fifth Avenue's New York store, but very few of these types of events have occurred. Prior to that, in 2000, *Frédéric Malle Editions de Parfums* began putting a public face on perfumers. Before this, at least in the United States, perfumers were shrouded in mystery due to fears that they would upstage the brands for which they were creating fragrances. Malle's line of perfumer-inspired fragrances put the creator center stage, becoming part of the brand's equity, an ingredient that niche perfumery Le Labo also touts, albeit in a less prevalent manner—pictures of the perfumers who make the scents are not on the box, but they are openly discussed at counter. Malle, the grandson of Dior Perfumes founder Serge Heftler, was recently named fragrance columnist for *Allure*.

When asked if valid work was being done by untraditionally trained perfumers, Malle says, “No. The traditional way seems best to me. Also, [traditional perfumery training] only works if you work very hard, as it is a skill based on experience. Of course one does not go anywhere without talent. The types [untraditionally trained perfumers] that you make reference to are most often amateurs. From experience, I can tell you that their work, although some rare times different, is always imprecise and mediocre. It takes a very skilled artist to finish a fragrance.” Malle goes even further with regard to training by stating, “The best [perfumers] come out of the ex-Roure, now Givaudan, in Grasse. Another great source of top perfumers is International Flavors and Fragrance's in-house training.” Other academic perfumery schools, like the two Malle mentions, exist—but the public doesn't know about them.

Natural vs. Synthetic

Published in 2001, Aftel's *Essence and Alchemy* presents the early history of fine fragrance and application of select raw materials in perfumery. It encourages the crafting of fragrance from natural essential oils and absolutes, and includes simple formulas that are accessible. Because Aftel is aromamolecule averse—hence the chapter title “A Natural History of Perfumes”—there are missing pieces if one is seeking a complete and accurate history of fine fragrance and its evolution beyond Ernest Beaux's use of aldehydes in *Chanel No. 5*, the benchmark for fashion-based fragrance concepts.

In the same vein, Chandler Burr revealed some of the political inner workings of essential houses in his book, *The Emperor of Scent* (2003), through the

Using the Jean Carles Method

Jean Carles' frustration over a lack of olfactive training method led to the development of two distinct charts that organized raw materials by similarity and contrast, one for naturals and one for synthetics. The charts shown in T-1 (naturals) and T-2 (synthetic) contain 60 materials in each. Although Givaudan's perfumery school gives their students more in-depth charts—with about 150 natural and 350 synthetic raw materials—T-1 and T-2 are great examples of how this method works.

The charts may be interpreted as follows:

1. Starting with Study 1, and moving down the column (vertically), students are able to “learn by contrast.” This enables trainees to smell very different raw materials (lemon, rose, star anise, jasmine, mint, etc.), which are each very characteristic of the family they represent. According to Jean Guichard, who is currently director of Givaudan's Perfumery School, “Normally, there is no problem learning to distinguish between materials in this vertical study. It would be similar to seeing and being able to distinguish black, red and yellow.” The same exercise can be carried out with Studies 2–6, always working vertically. This concludes the study of the contrast type of smelling.
2. Moving on to Study 7, and moving across the row (horizontally), students are able to compare the raw materials of the same family and distinguish between them. Students start with the citrus family: lemon, orange, grapefruit, lime, etc. All of these raw materials are citrus, fresh, energetic, acidic and juicy. The goal is to find the facets that characterize each of them—some words, some peculiar odors typical to lemon that are reminiscent of grapefruit, etc. Here are some examples:
 - Lemon: acidic, sour and sweet, aggressive, bright, lemon cake, lemon tea ...
 - Grapefruit: fresh, orangey, but bitterness is coming in some minutes, aldehydic, piquant ...
 - Orange: fresh, sparkling, freshly squeezed orange juice, summer holidays ...

The idea for these charts is simple but ingenious. As Guichard explains, “In every learning process we never start with the impossible, but we should proceed progressively. Here our nose will be slowly getting [acclimated] and slowly improving. It [requires] continuous work; exercise is necessary everyday. Exactly as musicians need to practice scales with their fingers, perfumers need to practice raw material scales with their nose.”

Olfactive study of natural raw materials*

Study	Family	1st Study	2nd Study	3rd Study	4th Study	5th Study	6th Study
7th	Citrus notes	Lemon oil Italy Orpur	Bergamot oil Italy Orpur	Mandarin oil Yellow Italy Orpur	Orange oil, Florida	Lime oil distilled	Grapefruit oil
8th	Agrestic notes (camphorated)	Lavender oil France Orpur	Lavandin Grosso oil Orpur	Rosemary oil, Northern Africa Orpur	Eucalyptus oil rect.	Armoise oil	Clary sage oil France Orpur
9th	Green notes	Galbanum oil Concentrated	Volet leaves abs. Orpur				
10th	Citral notes	Lemongrass oil Guatemala	Verbena Africa RGV	Citronella oil Java			
11th	Minty notes	Peppermint oil	Spearmint oil USA type				
12th	Anisic notes	Star Anise oil, China	Basil oil, Egypt Orpur	Tarragon oil			
13th	Spicy notes	Clove buds oil	Cinnamon bark oil Ceylon	Nutmeg oil Indonesia	Black Pepper ess.	Pink peppercorns C02	Coriander oil
14th	Floral notes	Jasmine abs. Communelle	Tuberose abs., India	Ylang Ylang oil Extra Orpur	Mimosa abs. France	Crude orris butter	Muguet C5 RIFM
15th	Rosy notes	Rose de Mai abs. France Orpur	Rose oil, Bulgaria	Geranium oil, Africa			
16th	Orange flower notes	Neroli oil, Tunisia	Petitgrain oil Paraguay	Orange flower abs.			
17th	Fruity notes	Blackcurrant buds abs. 70%/PG	Osmanthus abs.				
18th	Woody notes	Sandalwood Australia SD	Cedarwood Virginia Type	Vetiver oil Haiti dried filtered	Patchouly oil w/ iron	Oakmoss abs. Tyrol SB 10% PHT	Guaiacwood oil Paraguay
19th	Resin notes	Incense Resin. Washed SB 50% PHT	Myrrh Résinoid Washed SB	Elemi Résinoid 50% BB			
20th	Ambery notes	Cistus abs. SB, Spain					
21st	Balsamic notes	Peru Balsam abs. SIS	Vanilla abs. RBD	Tonka beans abs. colourless	Benzoin Tears Siam 50% DIP	Tolu Balsam abs. GV	Syrax Résinoid Honduras SB
22nd	Animalic notes	Civet artess. abs. 10% PHT	Castoreum Arte. Resin. 246/2 IFR 10% PHT				

*Property of Givaudan

Study	Family	1st Study	2nd Study	3rd Study	4th Study	5th Study
6th	Citrus notes	Citral Lemarome N	Dihydro myrcenol	Methyl pamplemousse		
7th	Agrestic notes	Linalyl acet. synt	Camphor synt			
8th	Green notes	Hexenol-3-cis	Tricyclal	Galbanone 10	Gardenol	Methyl octine carbonate
9th	Marine notes	Calone 1951	Azurone 10%/TEC			
10th	Minty notes	Menthol natural	Carvone laevo			
11th	Anisic notes	Anethole synt				
12th	Aldehydic notes	Ald. C 10 Decylic FCC 10% DPG	Ald. C 11 Undecylenic 10% DPG			
13th	Spicy notes	Eugenol pure	Cinnamic ald.			
14th	Floral notes	Linalool synt	Hydroxycitronellal synt	Florol	Isoraldeine 95	Ionone beta
15th	Rosy notes	Phenyl ethyl alc.	Geraniol extra	Citronellyl acet.	Damascone beta	Rose oxyde laevo
16th	Jasminic notes	Benzyl acet. extra	Hedione	Benzyl salicylate	Lactone jasmine gamma	
17th	Orange flower notes	Methyl anthranilate extra				
18th	Fruity notes	Peach pure	Prunolide	Hexenyl acet. cis-3	Raspberry ketone	Cassis base 345 FH
19th	Woody notes	Iso E Super	Vetivenyl acet. 112 extra	Evernyl	Sandalore	Javanol
20th	Ambery notes	Ambroxif	Belambre 50%/IPM	Kephalis	Cedryl methyl ether	
21st	Balsamic notes	Cinnamic alc. synt				
22nd	Sweet notes	Vanillin	Heliotropine crist.	Coumarin pure crist.	Ethyl maltol	
23rd	Musky notes	Galaxolide 50 DEP	Moxalone 50%/TEC STAB	Nirvanolide		
24th	Leathery notes	Pyralone				
25th	Animalic notes	Indole pure 10% DPG				

*Property of Givaudan

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experience of Luca Turin, a biophysicist who openly challenged the shape-based theory of olfaction purported by Richard Axel and Linda Buck (who, incidentally, received the Nobel Prize in 2004 for their discovery of the human genes governing olfactory receptors, a year after Burr's book was published). Turin was an interesting study, and his knack for describing his love of perfume has become as beloved as it is emulated. Burr, appointed perfume critic by the *New York Times* in 2006, is on the opposite end of the fragrance spectrum when compared to Aftel—he has an interest in molecules that are created in the lab.

Bickering regarding naturals and synthetics does more to serve ego and ignorance than it does fine fragrance creation and education. A well-made fine fragrance has distinct signature and when that quality is not present, whether in a natural composition or one that utilizes both synthetics and naturals, the consumer will be dissatisfied. This is something everyone can agree on.

Reaching Out

In addition, when the naturals vs. synthetics debate replaces well-informed dialogue, flavor and fragrance houses need to take action, alongside industry organizations like the Fragrance Foundation and the American Society of Perfumers. Building on existing erudition, these institutions and corporations have tremendous potential that can be actualized through education programs in schools and in the media. The public is hungry for this kind of information, which explains the fervor with which fragrance bloggers and their readers discuss a perfume's creator *and* the juice. For those who are more numbers focused, less than expected sales in an oversaturated market should be reason enough to listen to the consumer and build the knowledge base.

Givaudan's Jean Guichard makes a simple, yet powerful observation regarding the appreciation of the art of fine fragrance and the importance of education. "Perfumery can be compared to painting. There are some masterpieces that we appreciate more when they have been explained to us, when we understand the context, the historical climate, the idea and the personal life of the painter. It is the same for some 'complicated' perfumes, such as chypre ones. Some perfumes are simpler to understand, like citrus or floral ones, but we can't impose olfactory education—the interest needs to come from a person. We can try to introduce a module in school as it is true that children are very perceptive and interested in odors ... we can educate their 'noses' and help them to be more expert choosing their products later."

A fine fragrance gift with purchase or sexy marketing story may be an attention grabber in-store, but neither are catalysts for long-term sales growth—knowledge is. Knowledge reaches beyond the parameters of brand awareness and evokes passion in the customer and makes them want to learn more. So who can be reasonably considered a perfumer? If the industry does not make an effort to educate the public regarding what it takes to become a perfumer, then the answer is *virtually anyone*.

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