

# The Stories are in the Juices

A talk with *The Perfect Scent* author Chandler Burr

When we asked Chandler Burr what interested him about perfume as a subject, he simply said, “It’s the greatest underappreciated art in the world.” And we agree. Here, Burr discusses the process of writing and researching *The Perfect Scent* and some of the realities and challenges of today’s fragrance industry. Turn to page 22 to read an excerpt from the book and send us your feedback at [jallured@allured.com](mailto:jallured@allured.com).

**P&F:** Can you talk a little bit about the roadblocks involved when you tried to gain access to the fragrance industry? How did you gain the trust of such secretive organizations? Or did you?

**Burr:** When *The Emperor of Scent* came out, my agent called and told me David Remnick, editor in chief of *The New Yorker*, had read it, and they were interested in my writing for them. I thought, Great. I’d studied international relations at l’Institut d’études politiques in Paris and Chinese history at Min Zu Xue Yuen (Central Institute of Foreign Nationalities) in Beijing. I started my journalism career as a stringer at the *Christian Science Monitor’s* Southeast Asia bureau in Manila, then I got a Master of International Economics & Japan studies from the Paul H. Nitze School of Johns Hopkins University. (I speak Japanese, I’ve interned at a huge Tokyo-based trading company and figured I’d be working there.) And I’d written on business, politics, and science.

So I’m sitting there having lunch with Daniel Zalewski, who became my editor at *The New Yorker*, and I’m proposing to him economics stories on Japan and China, developmental pieces on India. And to my total surprise he says, “There was something in *Emperor* that really interested us. It’s the fact that perfumes are made.” I say, “Ummmm-right.” Of course they’re made. He says, “That’s obvious to you, but to 99.9% of the world, perfume is like milk. You go to Gristede’s, to the refrigerated dairy aisle, there’s a white liquid in a plastic container. You buy it. You never think about the cow, you never think about the udder, the pasteurization, the farm.” He’d never heard of people called “perfumers,” which seemed very exotic to them, and he didn’t know that these people made the juices Donna Karan and Giorgio and so on put their names on. So he proposed a piece to me: I’d follow the creation of a perfume behind the scenes from start to finish.

It was the last (literally the last) piece I wanted to do for them. I didn’t feel comfortable, and still don’t honestly, in “fashion,” and I didn’t consider *Emperor* as being

“about perfume” at all, although in retrospect I realize that was naïve. But the process aspect of the piece interested me—I’m a nut for process stories—so I said yes. The problem was that all the houses said no. Everyone. They all turned us down. I went to Estée Lauder first because that, to me, is the obvious first choice: New York, no one more important, excellent history. They simply could not do it because it contradicted their then-policy—this has greatly evolved in just these past few years and they continue to become more open, but this was 2003—of maintaining publicly that Mrs. Lauder made her own perfumes. So I tried Armani. Giorgio himself said no; again, he didn’t want people knowing he didn’t make his own perfumes. Jo Malone (herself) said no. Burberry, Kenneth Cole, Dior: no. The Ralph Lauren people never even returned my calls. Chanel was interested but never said yes. Guerlain said never, ever, ever! Shock, horror, etc. etc. Please. Jennifer Lopez said no—I mean, I could go on and on. Someone suggested I go to Hermès. I said, “Don’t be ridiculous: Parisian, closed up, snotty, difficult, impossible.” I went to them. They discussed it, we negotiated a few points, and pretty quickly they said yes. And they were, from the word go, open and lovely and pleasant and honest and easy and an absolute pleasure to work with. Amazing, really.

**P&F:** How were you able to recreate Jean-Claude Ellena’s creative process, from the initial notes and sketches to the numerous mods and all the editing in-between?

**Burr:** I was there! I was sitting with him, in Paris and in Grasse. Not 100% of the time, but I was in most of the important meetings, as far as I know, and not just on the juice but on packaging, marketing, sales, the box, the bottle, you name it. There was one very funny moment when I’d sat in on a very, very highly confidential meeting on Hermès’ perfume marketing strategy in marketing head Hélène Dubrule’s office, and suddenly after it was over and everyone was gone Hélène looked at all the confidential documents strewn across the table and the blackboard with their marketing plans for the next two



Photo courtesy of Sam Trinson

years and threw herself instinctively across one of the documents. We stared at each other for two seconds and then both burst out laughing. Obviously all of it was completely off the record, but still. They trusted me completely. I'm sure it was strange for them, but they were just astonishingly open, and they used me in a few meetings to check English translations and so on. I'm quite certain that there were things I didn't see, and they may well have snuck off in secret and had some conversations, but it certainly didn't show. There was, for example, never a moment in any meeting when someone referenced something I hadn't heard about. As far as I can tell, they completely lived up to their word on total access.

**P&F:** Ellena's primary job as Hermès' in-house perfumer appeared to be "translator" of Dubrulle, Gaultier et al.'s comments. Can you talk a little about these interactions?

**Burr:** What was interesting was the degree to which Ellena, Dubrulle and Gaultier simply got along. Gaultier is known, with complete justification, as being *very* blunt, very direct, very strong, but nothing she said to Ellena shocked him, or at least not visibly. He's developed, as have most successful perfumers, quite a thick skin; in the book I refer to the "Mona Lisa face" he wears during meetings, and he wore it then, probably reflexively. Dubrulle was much more subtle, although she's no less direct in the end; she goes right for the point, simply with a more silken manner. The thing is, Ellena *was* Hermès during this, and that made all the difference. Yes, he translated their ideas, but into his own creation. He took their comments, executed them, but ultimately he had the almost unique luxury of doing so on a perfume that was, most profoundly, his and his alone. He didn't create their idea; they guided him in creating his. Completely different from the usual arrangement.

**P&F:** You interviewed two generations of Ellenas. Are there material differences between the old guard and the new?

**Burr:** There are some remarkable similarities between Céline and her father—I think it's so funny she always refers to him as "Jean-Claude," very normal and healthy—in approach. She doesn't have his ego and sensitivity—he's very sensitive to comments, nuances, very careful about the way he presents himself to the world—but he has, of course, vastly greater experience and seasoning. I loved her childhood memories of the scents he made for her and her brother. I loved putting that in the book.

**P&F:** Symrise's revamped perfumer training program includes media-interaction education. Does this sort of program signal that fragrance companies are beginning to "pull back the curtain?"

**Burr:** It is absolutely clear to me that both the brands and the scent makers are starting to realize what they should have picked up on long ago—consumers are bored to insanity with "the story" and "the dream." As I quote

Frédéric Malle in my book as saying, "Dream? It's more of a nightmare." This "we're going to tell you a marketing story, and you're going to buy because of that" is not just patronizing and anachronistic to this era and out of touch with the much more advanced communications approaches of other, more sophisticated industries and suffocating and (oh yeah) detrimental to perfume sales, it has a hugely negative influence on the juices themselves. I have *a lot* to say on this; I was thinking of writing a book on it, though it might be too "inside baseball." We'll see. And I readily admit that the insane sales of Hugo Boss seem to contradict everything I believe about how perfume should be created, positioned, communicated and sold. But I think in fact that's not true; Boss-style commercial crap will always be a huge money machine, but a house, particularly major houses like Lauder, Dior and Yves Saint Laurent, need to lead. That forward edge is what actually sells. Have a Boss or a Kenneth Cole brand to scoop up those dollars; if Toyota didn't have Lexus and Nissan didn't have Infiniti, they wouldn't be the successes they are. The quality, daring and innovation drive the machine. What is so striking about the perfume industry, for years so behind in its presentation of itself to the public, are these vast, specific possibilities in front of it for those smart enough to identify them.

And this ridiculous obsession with the secrecy of formulae. It's insane. It is, to be more precise, 180 degrees the wrong direction. An obsession with secrecy in the age of the Internet, Transparency International, Wikipedia,

and open-source coding? Are you kidding me? The problem is, hugely, French. Specifically, the problem is that this is a French industry, and French culture slavishly venerates “expertise,” an idea of the expert fetishized and rendered as ideology: “I’m the master, so you’ll do and buy what I say.” It is one more way in which French culture is, I’m very sorry to say, Darwinianly maladapted to the modern world, and your industry suffers terribly from it. Perfume needs glasnost, perestroika, and some open-source coding. The irony is that, for that portion of the public that is intelligent and interested, the obvious solution is staring you in the face. Formulae, extraordinary raw materials, cool synthetics, structure, technical wizardry, correctly communicated to the public, is exactly where the future lies.

**P&F:** You’re a great champion of synthetics. Do you think the public can handle the truth?

**Burr:** Not only can the public handle it, to the degree to which it *can’t* handle it there are terrific opportunities. Cause some friction! You’ll see what happens. It should not be hard to understand that losing customers in the short run is exactly what you want to do if they’re the right customers to lose. Many business people understand this. Many don’t. Standing up for an idea is not only about the idea, which would be enough on its own; it’s about the results of the act of standing up.

**P&F:** You’ve investigated the fragrance industry and have come up with some not-so-flattering observations. Have you managed to make friends in the industry, particularly with perfumers?

**Burr:** I actually, to my amazement, am on terms with almost all the perfumers I’ve ever met that range from good to warm, fascinating, substantive professional friendships. I love, love hanging out with them, talking perfumes and formulae and raw materials. And this is true for the most part with the executives, the evaluators, the lab people. There is one executive I find actually pathologically insane, a true sociopath, but he’s minor, thank God, and obviously I’ve had crossed purposes with people. I’ve been forcing things from my side, but that’s actually created better and better professional relationships. The stories are in the substance. The stories are in the *juices*. I was just told by two people that I’m seen as a very aggressive person. I don’t feel like one, but I need to modulate that. I’ll say immediately that the least interesting people, by a mile, are the brands, and in particular the designers. There are few I’d want to spend time with personally or who I particularly admire professionally. Lots of narcissism, vanity, control-freakiness: “My scent represents my love of women! And luxury! And beauty!” Give me a break. You sit there and spout PR crap, and it’s vapid. I’m going to Milan soon to talk with Miuccia; she’s supposed to be truly different from all this. We’ll see. Oh, and I actually really enjoyed Tom Ford. He’s an exception in my experience.

**P&F:** You talk about the less than ideal manner in which most fragrances are purchased at retail today. Do you have any insights into how this can be combated?

**Burr:** Yes. One very specific idea I very much believe retailers should implement: Communicate to the consumer—and there are dozens of ways of doing this—that a. you need to wear the scent on skin, b. it needs to be over a period of time so you can see how it evolves, and c. it’s not only OK, it’s quite normal to come out of Sephora with four different scent points on your arms. Smell them every 20 minutes or so over the day. The industry’s response: “But you lose sales because a certain percentage of people won’t come back.” My response to that: It’s a gamble, but in the long run you may get customers who are both more certain of what they like and more attached to it and thus buy more of it.

**P&F:** A wide-angle question: with competition from scented body care, air care, etc., what place does fine fragrance have in the world—particularly from a mass fine fragrance point of view? Is the “fragrance noise” too much?

**Burr:** Everyone definitely needs to be careful about raising the volume too high and from too many sources. That said, scent branding is the most fascinating thing on the marketing horizon, I think it can be done well, and it’s the future.

**P&F:** Is your sense that the industry’s problems are intractable?

**Burr:** Are you kidding? Of course not! Yes, the European banned list is a problem to the degree to which it’s being run by left-wing anti-science “all-natural” nuts, but the industry will get through that. I just got a phone call from IFRA’s director general, Jean-Pierre Houri, a few minutes ago. He and I are talking tomorrow, and perhaps he’s going to tell me about some new attack on the industry, but I do not think that’s the problem.

**P&F:** Finally, what are your favorite smells?

**Burr:** I used to love the airplane smell, but I fly too much now. So now it’s clean man’s armpit, fresh breath, new money, the Firmenich CO<sub>2</sub> baby carrot, sunlight on straw, clean girl’s neck, Nickel shaving cream (a scent made from chlorophyll), fresh dry oil, and the last on this totally arbitrary list is the smell of my Paxil. I’ve been on SSRIs for 14 years, and suddenly I got a bottle of the generic, paroxetine, from Walgreens, and it smells like the most luscious, exquisite fresh frozen yogurt! It’s the most amazing scent, and who the hell had the brilliant idea of scenting drugs with that? If anyone can get me some of this scent in concentration in alcohol, I’d really appreciate it.

---

To purchase a copy of this article or others, visit [www.PerfumerFlavorist.com/articles](http://www.PerfumerFlavorist.com/articles). 