

The Scent Archivist

WFFC honoree Ruth Sutcliffe pulls back the curtain on her working process and rich olfactive memory

Sometimes a good memory is the key to a successful fine fragrance.

Last year, as she was working on *McGraw by Tim McGraw*, Coty's senior director of international fragrance development, Ruth Sutcliffe, recalled a demo fragrance she'd smelled back in 2005. The scent, formulated by Symrise master perfumer Maurice Roucel, had been created as part of Sutcliffe's 'blue sky' program, which invites perfumers to formulate without a brief and few cost restrictions. These fragrances provide perfumers a unique outlet to explore their creativity without the filter of evaluation or marketing teams. Sutcliffe maintains a library of these scents both in her acute olfactive memory and a physical archive at Coty's Park Avenue offices. In the midst of the *McGraw* project, she called Roucel and said, "Remember that fragrance? Let's dig it out and look at it for this project." Despite the tremendous internal support for the fragrance, the fragrance did not win the market

research for *McGraw*. However, she continues to watch for any upcoming project that the fragrance may fit with. The success in the blue sky program is exemplified by fragrances such as Yann Vasnier's *Fabulosity*, and an upcoming Celine Dion launch in the spring of 2009. "That's how I work,"

says Sutcliffe, "good olfactive memory and attention for significant fragrances."

The scents engraved in Sutcliffe's mind stretch well beyond 2005, to her childhood on an Arkansas farm: warm goat's milk, manure, hay, the wet earth of the forest floor, carrots freshly plucked from the ground, her father's *Old Spice*. "I never appreciated the smells until I got into the business," she says.



"I still go back to them, and when I smell with perfumers I pick up those particular notes sometimes and I'll say to the perfumer, 'Wow, that smells like tomatoes, that particular smell when you pick them off the stalk.'"

Blue Sky Fragrances: Formulating Without Constraints

During a visit to Coty's offices, Sutcliffe shows off her library of blue sky fragrances submitted by top perfumers from the major fragrance houses in New York and Paris.

Women in Flavor and Fragrance Commerce (WFFC) Honors Ruth Sutcliffe

On Sept. 25, the WFFC will present Ruth Sutcliffe with its Annual Award. Sutcliffe, senior director of international fragrance development for Coty Beauty, has been selected due to her contributions to and leadership in the fragrance industry.

Sutcliffe began her career at Fritzsche, Dodge and Olcott (now part of Givaudan). There she typed and cost out formulae for perfumers and later became an evaluator. At Creations Aromatiques (now part of Symrise) she served as a perfumer's lab technician, mixing formulae and learning perfumery raw materials, eventually returning to fragrance evaluation. Sutcliffe subsequently held positions at Fragrance Resources, IFF (where she co-authored the patent with several other colleagues for NeutrIFF for the mitigation of malodors) and Clairol, before joining Coty in 2001.

In her current position, Sutcliffe is responsible for brands such as Celine Dion, Nautica, Halle Berry, Tim McGraw, Baby Phat and Stetson.

"Life has to be an adventure and I feel it's important to give back to society as much as possible," says Sutcliffe, whose volunteer work has included efforts at Ground Zero in Manhattan following 9/11, with the Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation and the National Resources Defense Council, and giving of her time to Greenwich, Connecticut-area organizations.

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“There’s no way you can create a great fragrance within two to three weeks,” she says. “I’m not a reactive person. I like proactive work—thinking ahead ... working as I go along.” The fragrance library, she explains, allows her to maintain quality and creativity even as project timelines shrink.

“I challenge perfumers to show me fragrances they feel are significant, unique, and signed,” she says. The program allows perfumers to eschew concept and focus more strictly on creativity.* The submissions are then presented directly to Sutcliffe by the perfumers as often as possible.

“This is where the perfumers are supposed to show me what they’re passionate about,” she says. “It’s up to them to show me what they want to show me, not something that has been screened and developed by an evaluator or salesperson.” Sutcliffe stresses the need for perfumers to be free to work outside of price and concept guidelines that can choke off creativity and lead to bland scents.

The one-on-one presentations offer a unique opportunity for Sutcliffe to provide direct and personalized feedback on a scent, and allow her to get to know the

*Sutcliffe does note, however, that she wants formulae costs to remain “in reach” so that if she wants to move forward on a concept she doesn’t have to entirely reformulate a scent.

perfumers better. “A lot of what we do is about relationships, no matter what side of the table you’re on,” she says. “You can tell that [the perfumers] enjoy the smelling sessions. They smile. They’re happy to show something that is outside the box.”

While the blue sky fragrances may sometimes contain polarizing notes or be too niche-oriented for mass-market release, Sutcliffe will often cue in on something unique that has potential for a fragrance concept. From each batch of submissions, a handful will typically stick in Sutcliffe’s mind long-term. Later, as in the case of Roucel and *McGraw*, a brief may come in that appears to fit a demo scent. In those cases, Sutcliffe returns to that fragrance and reworks it with the perfumer. But taking that raw nugget of creativity and revising it for marketability—without losing signature—is a challenge, one that requires patience and a long view.

“There’s a perfumer who’s been working with me on a fragrance for over a year,” says Sutcliffe, citing just one example. “We brought it up out of the box once, twice, tried to work on it, but it wasn’t right at that time.” She adds that fragrance creation is often a matter of timing: the right project, the right concept, the right fit. “Sooner or later I’m going to find the right spot for this fragrance, because I believe in it.”

From Brief to Fragrance

In working with some of the biggest celebrity brands in fine fragrance—Halle Berry, Celine Dion and Tim McGraw—Sutcliffe has found that the flagship celebrities want to be involved in the creative process. “We want them to get involved,” she says, “because it’s all about our partnership with them and their ownership of their own brand.”

Sutcliffe works to develop and maintain good relationships with her celebrity contacts, noting that building trust is indispensable. “I sit with them from the very beginning and hold smelling sessions,” she says. “My goal is to understand what they like and dislike about fragrance. For instance, during the first meeting with Celine, she expressed that she likes to play golf. She likes the smell of the ocean water, mimosa and wood notes.” These meetings, which are more conversational than interview-oriented, serve to hone in on preferences from numerous angles, including: childhood and olfactive memories, preferred gourmand notes, favorite flowers, favorite seasons, and foods.

Following an analysis of the insights gathered, Sutcliffe briefs out suppliers with as much relevant information as possible, including cost guidelines, deadlines and an outline of the process. Evaluations can go on for several weeks, and at times Sutcliffe will conduct interim smelling sessions.

“It’s important to touch base with the houses and make sure that there are interim smelling sessions so that I can be assured that they are on the right track, and if not, I redirect them to the right focus. Finding the right fragrances for the brief is often a matter of efficiency, of time, having good communication skills and being focused.”

In Her Own Words: Ruth Sutcliffe on Her Favorite Fragrances and Notes

Be Delicious

I think Maurice Roucel did an amazing job putting that apple top note onto [DKNY] *Be Delicious*. It's beautifully intertwined with the flower heart notes. Historically, we would not dare put an apple note in a fragrance because people would almost systematically say 'that smells like a shampoo.' But because Maurice is such a great and talented perfumer, he's done it in a way that's absolutely wonderful. The fragrance is signature and refreshing to the marketplace and will continue to affect other fragrances. It's a trendsetter.

Angel

Angel took a long time [to catch on]. Introduced in 1990s, it was considered polarizing by many people, and did not sell well. Now, in 2008, it is not only a trendsetter but a global best seller. With Coty Beauty in the mass market, we don't have the luxury of time for a fragrance to become successful. A fragrance is considered a success if its sales are in the top 20 within months after launch. Olivier Cresp's amazing creativity with *Angel* is significant because of what it has done: it has opened up a whole new array of fragrances with interesting new gourmand notes, and has placed the emphasis of patchouli back into focus.

Light Blue

Dolce Gabanna Light Blue is one of these fragrances that when you smell it on the street, in a department store, you can't miss it. It is so signature, and has a beautiful sillage. Breathtaking is the word. Olivier Cresp again has created an amazing perfume. This truly unique fragrance was created using new molecules that Firmenich has developed. Firmenich has a large group of scientists in Geneva who continue to work on new molecules so their perfumers are able to formulate groundbreaking, new scents. This is a perfect example of how technology meets creativity, and has to be applauded.

Acqua di Gio and Bulgari Au The Vert

These fragrances are also so creative and masterfully blended. They are significant in the history of fragrance for the fact that they have opened new pathways for other fragrances, and use notes that had not been explored before. One cannot argue that *Acqua di Gio* began the trend for new fresh, aquatic fragrances for men.

Emerging Notes

I love all the various pepper notes available to perfumers. I've had perfumers work pepper notes into some of our fragrances, because they can add such a wonderful signature and unique facet to a fragrance. The pepper notes are very diverse; they can be used in both male and female fragrances [such as] *Hermes' Poivre Samarkand*.

Recently, I've seen interesting green notes featured in my blue sky days. Although I personally like green notes in fragrances, green is difficult, particularly in the United States, because typically, green florals and green-dominant fragrances don't do well in market research. But I know that someday very soon ... there will be a fragrance that will use a beautiful green note in a way that will become significant.

I'm in love with wood notes [such as *Terre d'Hermes*]. Maybe it's because I was raised in the country surrounded by the woods and the smell of wood shavings. While wood notes have been traditionally used in men's fragrances, I believe they will become much more important in the women's category. This is due to many new, exotic wood notes available, and they tend to offer new sensuality, mystery or exoticness to the fragrance. *Feminite du Bois* sits quite alone on the genealogy chart, but watch that category grow in the next couple of years. As for men, Coty's own *Pure Suede* and *Tim McGraw* use an abundance of wood notes.

Read more excerpts of our conversation with Ruth Sutcliffe and coverage of the WFFC Annual Dinner in the September 17 and October 1 editions of *P&Fnow* (perfumerflavorist.com/newsletter/signup).

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Relationships with Perfumers

Sutcliffe's career has exposed her to numerous perfumers from Europe and the United States. "It is an honor to be

able to work with the greats—Maurice Roucel, Harry Fremont, Ellen Molner, Calice Becker and Carlos Benaim," to name a few. "With every experience and every relationship I grow and learn."

And just as every perfumer has a personality, every project presents unique challenges. "I've worked with some perfumers and have asked for a mod on something and it's right the first time," says Sutcliffe. "Sometimes it's frustrating when you know that you're up to the 200th modification before the fragrance is complete. It's great when you have a perfumer you communicate easily with, and I have to say that I have been fortunate. He or she

will know exactly what I'm directing, and turn around a mod the next day and it's right. It's just like magic when that happens—it's wonderful."

"I enjoy seeing the energy and enthusiasm from perfumers during the creative development process," she continues. "I love the relationships that I make, and that with every project there's a new challenge, a new adventure." She adds that it is important to know how to talk to perfumers as individuals. "We have to respect each one ... who they are, what they do and their expertise. I understand that if I have a good relationship with perfumers, I'll only get better fragrances."

This is Where I Belong: Gaining a Fragrance Perspective

At the start of her fragrance career, Sutcliffe was tasked with cleaning out Fritzsche, Dodge and Olcott's international product closet, which was stuffed with exotic brands from all over the world. The experience provided an opportunity to learn the scent preferences of different regions—pine smells from Germany, citrusy scents from Mexico, subtle fragrances from Japan. Cleaning out the company's sample refrigerator, Sutcliffe began testing and cataloging an array of fragrances. She kept the dipped blotters on her desk—sometimes for a week—and took notes on their character from the top note through to the dry down. She quickly realized, "This is the business where I belong."

In her early days, Sutcliffe typed and cost out formulae for perfumers. Later, she worked the bench at Creations Aromatiques, learning raw materials and mixing them into formulas. She recalls being particularly star struck when she met the perfumer who was said to have created her father's beloved *Old Spice*. Her education in the world of fragrance took another turn when she married a perfumer from Grasse, France. At this point in her career, she realized the differences between the ways certain perfumers formulated and she was able to receive a first-hand education in the world of *Grassoise*: "I got to see how he put together his formulas—a lot of very interesting details in the ingredients that went into what often ended up being a page-plus formula: the 0.001% of [certain materials] I used to think, why have it at all? Well, I soon learned that no matter how small of a portion, there is a significant reason for it."

Though her current job focuses on fine fragrance, Sutcliffe has amassed a broad perspective on all aspects of fragrance, from detergents to toilet bowl cleaners to kitty litter. "I believe I've worked on every end-use possible," she says, adding that her experiences have shaped what she values in a perfumer. "I really appreciate perfumers who can be very technical. The creative and artistic talents of perfumers are obviously very important, but those who can tackle technical issues in today's competitive environment are [crucial]."

Time Constraints and Fragrance Vocabulary

Sutcliffe has responded to shrinking launch timelines by keeping up her blue sky creative sessions and ensuring she does proactive smelling. "When I'm only given two to three weeks to come up with a fragrance, there's little that one can do from scratch," she explains. So I refer to the [fragrance archive] that I keep and try to work from there."

"I try to be as specific as possible with the direction that I envision for the fragrance. When I get briefed from a marketer on a concept, I can often cue in on the type of fragrance that belongs with that project. That comes with experience. I give those specifics to the perfumers and fragrance houses."

Sometimes Sutcliffe will name several benchmarks as reference points for the fragrance houses. For instance, she explains, she might mention Clinique *Happy* to communicate the need for "a joyful, sporty fragrance." If she's looking for a scent that is sparkling, fresh and green, she might cite Elizabeth Arden *Green Tea* or *Acqua Di Gio* Giorgio Armani.


Keeping up with fragrances on the market is key to keeping her fragrance vocabulary sharpened. "You better know the classic fragrances and fragrance preferences in the global markets" she says, "because when you go in to communicate with perfumers, they look for reference points. Communication is important. We're partners with our suppliers. The better information I can get them, the better fragrances I'll get."

Keeping on the Pulse

Working proactively means that Sutcliffe keeps a close eye on the fragrance regulatory landscape and raw material shortages—such as sandalwood and patchouli—which may spur future reformulations. "My position requires a lot of multitasking," she says. "I dip my hands into a lot of different areas." At any given time she is checking that oils are with the R&D staff, samples are getting approved, meanwhile working on new product concepts and ancillaries. Not to mention the elaborate launch preparation necessary once a project has come to fruition.

"I'm an explorer, and I have to keep on the pulse of what's happening while not losing sight of our mass-market consumer," says Sutcliffe. To stay fresh, she tracks trends in fashion, architecture, design, color, products, new stores, politics, ecology and global events—anything that can cause a ripple effect along the way. Following the attacks of Sept. 11th, when so many aspects of contemporary life suddenly seemed frivolous, Sutcliffe found herself with a new perspective that reconnected her with the root psychological benefits of fragrance: Creating dreams of romance, love and beauty. "Knowing that we can help create that dream or make somebody feel better about themselves on a particular day, that's a really rewarding feeling and that's why I continue."*

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*Sutcliffe notes that Sept. 11 affected the mood of the fragrance industry, at least in the short-term. In the wake of her volunteer work at Ground Zero, Sutcliffe witnessed the de-emphasis of sexy fragrances in favor of those highlighting love and comfort.