

# Finding Signature

Perfumer Cecile Krakower discusses olfactive identity, the complexities of the development process and decoding fragrance vocabularies

**M**ane perfumer Cecile Krakower laughs when asked if she has an olfactive signature. “I’ve been told that all of my fragrances are very textural,” she says. “I find it funny that people can recognize [my scents.]” For example, she says, “I work on making [woody fragrances] so soft and silky that they feel like just another layer of skin.”

The New York-based French ex-patriot, whose portfolio includes *Vertigo* (Vertigo Parfums) and *Yu* (Mane), notes that her relationship to fragrances is less about analyzing each component material than it is about the textures and feelings they impart. “I like it when something is ‘plump.’ I’m very sensitive to that.” And though she strongly disliked fruity notes when she first entered the industry, she has steadily gained an appreciation for renditions of edible concepts such as pear—so much so that they are now part of her signature. “I like juicy scents—the ‘velvet’ feel of a peach, the fresh and watery texture of a litchi. Those sensations are amazing.”

Meanwhile, Krakower keeps an eye on signature in her compositions. The perfumer believes in leaving a bit of her personality in her creations and that identity is a key component of that. Comparing overly safe scents to dull, forgettable people at parties, Krakower says that balanced polarity can achieve interesting love-hate relationships with consumers. “If you [merely] don’t like someone, you don’t care,” she says. “There’s no feeling and energy. The more people that hate something, the more potential there is for a lot of people to love it.”

Customers that carefully employ panel testing, she adds, will be able to harness this type of reaction in the service of competitive advantage. Too often, scents that are widely liked but loved by few sail through the evaluation process, ensuring little longevity. Here, Krakower cites the famous (and rare) case of *Angel*, which has always enjoyed broad scorn and devotion alike—to great effect. In addition to panel testing, globalization has exacerbated safe scent launches. As companies seek to launch fragrances that have ever-broadening appeal, distinction falls by the wayside. “People want to be individuals,” says Krakower, “they don’t want to blend in. You need to tell a

story.” She describes recent successes of clothing retailers H&M and Target, which have successfully created mass clothing with a sense of individuality and exclusivity. As she puts it, “Just because you purchase mass-market clothes doesn’t mean you can’t have a personality.”

## Tenacity and Competition in the Creative Process

“I always wanted to be a perfumer,” says Krakower. “I was doing my little mixes since I was seven and my dedication and passion for creating fragrances hasn’t changed.”

Yet Krakower, who describes her entry into the industry as “a big shock,” has made necessary adjustments to fit into the fragrance world’s competitive atmosphere. “When young people ask me what they should do to be a perfumer, I say you have to be a little bit of a masochist.” She laughs now about her naiveté at the time: “I don’t think I ever envisioned it would be such a huge industry, money-wise.” But the biggest acclimation involved the way in which perfumers work on projects.

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The perfumer’s job has only gotten more difficult over the years as timelines continuously shrink and many fragrance concepts and marketing plans lack perceptible originality. As a young student, Krakower had imagined herself happily creating fragrances and being lavished with positive feedback. The reality is that the perfumer forever begins with a blank page that must be quickly filled on a tight deadline.

“You start working on your vision, translating it, and have it compounded in the lab,” she says, “Then it comes back—well, it’s not exactly what you were thinking of. Then you tweak it for the feeling, the texture you wanted, going after the freshness. It’s like sculpting with clay. You go over it, over and over. It begins to take shape and resemble your original vision. Then you dare to show it to others. You’re always questioning yourself.” The constant assessment is, in her words, “like undressing your mind in front of someone else.”

Meanwhile, the marketers involved in these projects may not have the level of fragrance knowledge they should, a point echoed during this year’s American Society



Cecile Krakower

Read our 2005 interview with Krakower online at [perfumerflavorist.com](http://perfumerflavorist.com).

of Perfumers' panel. At the same time, the entire industry laments excess launches, though little has been done to stop it. All of this has left customers with little time to properly involve themselves in projects. "If you don't spend the time to [properly] develop fragrances, how do you expect people to discover and fall in love with them?" Sometimes, Krakower observes, "It's too much like last-minute shopping. Everything you hear is 'speed to market,' 'reactivity.' If you don't truly pay attention to [making] everything cohesive, the end message to the consumer is going to be mixed. If you have a mixed message, then all you can have is a mixed result."

Simultaneously, she adds, perfumers are competing internally and externally for the win. Attending Givaudan's perfumery school as a student, Krakower was fortunate enough to find a mentor in then-program director Bernard Escano. However, out in the industry, the competitive politics within fragrance houses can impede these sorts of relationships. Deadline pressures loom and there is little incentive for perfumers to give their time to junior members of the team because those young perfumers are in effect competitors. Krakower adds that not everyone is a born teacher and that it is up to junior perfumers to find mentors that match their own sensibilities.

Despite all of the pressure and deadlines, she says, "I still love what I do. After almost 15 years in this industry, I don't think I could do anything else. Sometimes I wake up at 2:00 AM and think, 'I have to try this idea,' and write it down on my pad next to the bed. I still live and breathe and sweat and cry fragrance."

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### Navigating Fragrance Vocabulary

Krakower has spent the vast majority of her career in the United States, with the effect that, "I can't even describe a fragrance in French."

The perfumer, whose textural fragrance sensibilities demand a range of evocative descriptors, voices particular concern about the lack of well-defined fragrance vocabularies within fragrance houses and among the houses and customers. "Describing scents is so personal. When you say 'lush,' what does it mean to you? To me it could mean something else. You have to decode somebody else's vocabulary. With any person that you're going to talk to about your fragrance, you're going to need a personal dictionary."

Krakower recalls her experiences when she first came to the United States from Europe. American evaluators would ask for fruity notes, which Krakower interpreted in her European way as peach, which in turn had nothing to do with the US understanding of the concept. Through trial and error, she was able to interpret her colleagues' requests. "Now I know it ['fruity'] needs to be luscious, mouthwatering."

In another case, Krakower worked with a client that repeatedly called for a scent to be "more lush." Finally, when her attempts seemed to miss the mark repeatedly, she stopped and said, "What smells lush to you?" To the client, lush was ethereal floralcy, "like when you walk by a flower shop." In Krakower's mind, the concept had more closely resembled the leaves of a magnolia tree and humidity. "We were both using the same words, but not the same olfactive associations. It's important to listen to the person you're sharing an olfactive experience with. If you don't have the right translation, it makes [development] hard."

Meanwhile, not everyone deconstructs fragrances in the same way. Some perfumers may smell a perfume and break it down by components, while others may analyze scents by emotional or sensorial impact. While Krakower holds a master's in chemistry, she tends more toward the emotional interpretation of scents.

"The way everybody perceives and responds to [scents] is different," she says, "even with raw materials." And because different perfumers react to materials uniquely, the ways in which they use them to effect will also differ. "It's part of the magic of this job," says Krakower. "It's an ongoing discovery."

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