

Comparing Notes: Woody Notes and Perfumery Puzzles

A discussion with perfumers David Apel and Maurice Roucel

Perfumer Maurice Roucel of Symrise sees many threads of the lineage of woody materials in Ysamber K (Symrise), the ethylene ketal of isolongifolanone.¹ On this day, he and colleague David Apel are smelling blotters of a 20% dilution in alcohol. “It’s a humid woody note,” says Apel. “At the same time it has a very sharp, almost Cedramber (IFF) character to it, too—a sharp, linear woodiness. I love it with clary sage and patchouli; those bring out the more natural aspect of the woodiness.”

Roucel, who recalls perfumery’s woody note transition from Vertofix Coeur (IFF) to Iso E Super (IFF), says, “For me, Ysamber K could be almost a new Iso E Super; this could be the next generation. There’s a little tonality that’s a little bit more dry ... a little bit like Timberol (Symrise) and Ambrocenide (Symrise). You have a lot of Iso E Super [character] with a lot of different ‘windows’: clary sage, Cedramber, cedarwood, Cashmeran (IFF), Timberol, Ambrocenide. It’s rich, interesting. You have facets of all these new molecules that have been extremely popular since the success of *Dolce Gabanna Light Blue*.”

“When you smell Karanal (Givaudan),” says Apel, “it has a profile like a spike. Ambrocenide has the same thing. But when you smell Iso E Super, all of a sudden everything goes off the charts. It’s warm, ambery, cedary, there’s actually a floral aspect, it’s dry—all of these different attributes. This [Ysamber K] has the same thing, but maybe more of a singular woody profile than Iso E Super. It [Ysamber K] has so many facets, it’s peppery for me. It’s herbaceous, that wet naturalness.”

“You can put as much in a fragrance, especially for men, as you want,” says Roucel. “It’s modern, it’s young.”

Apel adds, “I like to use it in masculine fragrances with clary sage or any sagelike materials—it compliments very well. A little coumarin with it, you almost feel a clary sage. It has a fresh kind of woody character that’s kind of damp. Nothing dry in a harsh cedary way. It also works really well in feminine notes for me. We talk so much about woody notes because there’s such a push, especially in feminine fragrances, to do the next iteration of ‘woody.’ *Light Blue* is certainly one of the inspirations—a fragrance loaded with woody character. Everybody wants the next woody fragrance and we’ve looked at a lot of them.”

Another of Apel’s favorite woody notes is caryophyllene alcohol acetate. However, he notes, “It’s not very performant—it’s too expensive for what you get out of it. But it’s a great note, very elegant. It’s what I use to replace vetiver acetate.” Roucel adds, “It’s a little bit ‘cigar box,’”

and says that the more affordable cedryl acetate and cedrol are good alternatives. “Each raw material has its own personality.”

Solving Fragrance Puzzles

Roucel and Apel are inspired as much by the technical puzzles of perfumery as they are by its emotion. Roucel notes that, for a perfumer, “There are three parts: technical/chemistry; the perfumer point of view, smelling and so forth; and the poetic manner—knowing how to express yourself.” He adds, “The most difficult thing is to have the idea. After that, it’s a question of technique.”

Here, Roucel uses the metaphor of a novel written without using the letter “e.” “We [perfumers] can make such an exercise, too,” he says, adding that he enjoys experimenting with different techniques to achieve newness. Roucel explains that he once created a perfume at Proprietary Perfume and Flavours, the former Quest, using only the house’s “signature” materials. This olfactory lipogram forced Roucel to adapt his skills with a severely limited palette. “I wasn’t mixing 1,500 raw materials,” he says, “so I chose one aldehyde and arrived at a formula of perhaps 30 raw materials.” The resulting fragrance, he found, smelled exactly of the company’s signature compositions.

Apel is similarly adventurous and experiment-minded. A number of years ago, he says, “I looked at the [top fragrances in the] US market and the European market—they were completely different.” At the time, gourmand notes dominated in Europe, while the US list was ruled by “very aquatic, sheer” scents. “I made a compilation of just the raw materials that were common between the two,” he says. “There were only eight. Those eight raw materials in that proportion is *Warm Vanilla Sugar* by BBW. Everyone said, ‘This will never sell,’ but we presented it and [the client] snapped it up. It’s fun to find some kind of puzzle.”

References

1. C Sell, *A Fragrant Introduction to Terpenoid Chemistry*. 343, Royal Society of Chemistry, Great Britain (2003)

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The Perfumers

David Apel started out on his path to perfumery in 1980 when the environmental lab job he applied for at Givaudan was already taken. Accepting an entry level job in the compounding lab instead, he was introduced to a career he had never before considered. “I absolutely fell in love with the raw materials,” he says. Under perfumer Helga Rotter’s tutelage, he transitioned into the company’s analytical lab. Using just GC at the time, which necessitated extensive olfactive work, Apel learned from each perfumer he served: “If you study the creator, along with the creations, you start to learn the mentality of fragrance creation.” He later honed his perfumery skills at Fragrance Resources before arriving at Symrise. “I had a scientific mind-set,” he explains, “and I loved this puzzle—trying to pull apart these things and put them back together.” As a perfumer, Apel says he has a special place in his heart for materials and accords that provide an “atmospheric feeling,” including aquatic, watery ozone notes such as Floralozone (IFF) and Calone (Pfizer).



David Apel

“You cannot teach perfumery,” says **Maurice Roucel**. An education in organic chemistry first led this perfumer to a position at Chanel where he assembled a GC lab under the supervision of perfumer Henri Robert. With that project complete, Roucel gradually taught himself about raw materials, bases and fragrances. With these skills he was eventually able to evaluate expensive musks and jasmynes for adulteration. His first scents were duplications of fragrances such as *Aramis* and *Paco Rabanne*. These helped serve as his resume, which led him to work for a number of key houses, including IFF, Quest, Dragoco and now Symrise.



Maurice Roucel

On this day, Roucel is wearing *Pleasures Intense for Men* (Estée Lauder), though, like Apel, he doesn’t necessarily have favorite fragrances or notes. He does, however, mention preferred accords, such as the ambery effects found in his own formulations for *Tocade Rochas* and *Insolence* (Guerlain), both of which he says epitomize, warm, sexy, feminine impressions.

“It’s not a question of quality of raw material,” he stresses, “it’s a question of the quality of the accord.”