Comparing Notes: Annie Buzantian and Harry Frémont

Finding balance, adding edge and giving fragrances a soul

Of the perhaps 3,000 novel aroma molecules created, assessed and vetted by Firmenich's perfumers and R&D staff each year, perhaps as few as three will make their way onto the company palette. One such material is Helvetolide, a captive musk that was discovered and commercialized in the 1990s.[a] "For a perfumer to discover a new material, it's almost like a painter discovering a new color," says master perfumer Harry Frémont, considering a blotter of the material. "Imagine … what the artist could do. We use the new materials in different contexts, giving new effects."

"The palette is so important," says master perfumer Annie Buzantian. "You can use the same note over and over again in different contexts, but when you have something special in particular that you fall in love with, it gives a fragrance a soul." These sorts of "exceptional notes," she adds, can in many cases serve as founding inspirations for fragrances.

"When you have something that is exclusive to your company, it gives you a sense of confidence in what you do and what you show to the client," says Frémont. "You feel you have something special. As a perfumer, it's important to have this kind of confidence."

"We are a very much like architects," says Buzantian. "We are influenced by new raw materials—a new construction material. It inspires you."

The somewhat ubiquitous material is markedly refined, making it generally more suitable for women's fragrances than men's scents. "It's luxurious, elegant, classic, it smells expensive," says Buzantian. "It's like a cloud. It lends itself to floral notes, woody notes. I've used it in a woody complex at 20%. And people think it's woody instead of musky. It has its own personality, but it lends itself to whatever else you want to work with. It's very malleable. It's like a chameleon." Frémont adds, "It's fruity, a little bit pearlike in the same way as Ambrettolide."[b]

"It does wonders in a fragrance, from top note all the way to dry down, which is very important in a musk," says Buzantian. Frémont notes: "Because some musks are very bottom-heavy, they flatten out fragrances. This one doesn't." As one perfumer colleague described it to Frémont, Helvetolide "is the Hedione of musks."[c]

[a]Helvetolide is a trademark of Firmenich.
[b]Ambrettolide is a trademark of IFF.
[c]Hedione is a trademark of Firmenich.

Perfumers Annie Buzantian and Harry Frémont

Frémont says that when Hedione was first discovered in the 1960s, it was understandably expensive and so used in fragrances at very low percentage levels. Buzantian says that when she was starting her career, the ingredient was used in 10% solution. Today, one finds fragrances that contain as much as 40% Hedione. Considering this evolution, Frémont foresees a time when fragrances will contain ever-greater levels of Helvetolide without feeling "sticky or heavy." Today, however, 5–10% is considered typical.

Buzantian's affection for Helvetolide is such that, in cases in which she has a modest price point for a project, she's willing to use the high-low technique to trade down on certain ingredients in order to still use the musk. "I'd rather use inexpensive materials and allow myself to use [Helvetolide]," she says.

Materials Discussed

Ambrox
Cetalox
Hedione
Helvetolide
Neobutanone

Finding Balance

Green notes are among Buzantian's favorites, she says, presenting blotters of Neobutanone Alpha at 1%.[d] Even at this dilution the ingredient still packs a punch. Buzantian recently used this material in a fragrance at just a trace, and even then it was still too strong. "It's very powerful, terribly potent," she says. "It's very strong on the blotter for a few days—one of those instances where you get great value for your money." Buzantian finds the material useful in both men's and women's fragrances. "It's almost a new interpretation of galbanum," she says. "There's almost a pineapple note, so it's kind of fruity. It makes for a beautiful signature. It gives you another edge, a new green nuance." While its tenacity makes it useful in toiletry applications as well as fine fragrance, Buzantian explains that it requires balance. "Developing a fragrance is like composing a piece of music," she says. "It's all about harmony and balance."

Adding Edge

"You could wear it as a fragrance," says Buzantian, smelling Cetalox at 10% on a blotter.[e] Frémont has used the ingredient—which is wholly synthesized without using clary sage as a starting material—in numerous fragrances due to its character, which is rougher and perhaps drier compared to Ambrox.[f] "It has an added woody aspect compared to Ambrox," he says, "which is more pure. I love it. We can use more because it is less expensive than Ambrox. It's refined, very elegant. It has a lot of presence without being too overwhelming. On skin it has incredible diffusion and sillage." While Buzantian describes the material as "disruptive," its power is never overwhelming. Like vanilla, its presence is unmistakable without being overstated. "I love this added woody note in the material," says Frémont. "This is a material that can be used anywhere—home care, beauty care and fine fragrance."

"Ambrox for me is very smooth," says Buzantian. "Cetalox has an edge. If I can make a comparison, Ambrox is sensuous and Cetalox is sexy. If a fragrance is too smooth and round, I use Cetalox; it gives me a point of difference. When something is too 'perfect,' it's not memorable."

On *Romance*

"There is a point in your career where you feel more confident in what you do and you manage your challenges much better," says Frémont. For him, Ralph Lauren *Romance* (1998) is that point—formulated 16 years into his career. "That's when I felt my craft had arrived," he says. "Also, I felt confident to talk about it and communicate. The hardest thing in this business is to take a fresh approach. At the time I still had this naïve approach to [creation]," a state of mind he finds challenging to replicate at this stage of his career. *Romance*, he says, "is very multifaceted, but it has character at the same time. I discovered [in the ensuing] years that people were wearing the fragrance and describing it in different ways. To some people it's a fruity fragrance. For some people it's a chypre. For some people it's a floral." Buzantian adds, "People talk about different parts of the fragrance when they talk about *Romance*."

"It's quite complex, visually," says Frémont. "When we do a fragrance we try to be very streamlined. With this one, there are a lot of layers that are all working together. When I did it, I didn't see all those [facets]." At one point, Frémont explains, the fragrance was more extreme, aspects of which were refined throughout the process. He laughs, "When it all came together and became a success, it was an amazing experience."

Craft versus Art

"We take ownership of the fragrances we develop," says Buzantian, "but in reality, we are only the co-authors of the fragrances [along] with our clients. We have few instances where we are the true creators of the fragrance … that is why Harry calls it a craft, instead of an art. It's a business. Let's never forget that."

Editor Jeb Gleason-Allured with Annie Buzantian and Harry Frémont

This bit of pragmatism on Buzantian's part stands in stark contrast to the unusual origins of her first designer fragrance win, the original *Gianfranco Ferré* scent, launched in 1984. "It is every perfumer's dream to go from the collection into the bottle," she says. "It happened without any modifications. It was a wonderful experience, but on the other hand, it was quite deceptive because it distorts the image of how difficult the creative process [typically] is." The fragrance resulted from a modification of a jasmine musk she'd worked on at the very beginning of her career. Buzantian modernized the scent, adding new ingredients. This finished fragrance had the serendipitous fortune of meeting the client's brief, which called for matching the scent of the flowers at his mountain villa. "It was more simplistic in its creation and put together more like a body care fragrance—having that stylized concept. The fragrance contains the sum of all the notes I love—white flowers, musk and all those things."

[d]Neobutenone Alpha is a trademark of Firmenich
[e]Cetalox is a trademark of Firmenich
[f]Ambrox is a trademark of Firmenich

Perseverance with a Smile: On Being a Perfumer

"Everything you do is a reflection of yourself," says Buzantian, "even when you're answering a brief that has to suit a certain client or requirement—you do it in your own style." Everything filters through the individual's collected experiences, knowledge and emotions, even as one meets the needs of the client. Buzantian explains that her eclectic training allowed her to define her own style. Frémont notes that he had a similar experience, recreating fragrances without a direct mentor to explain how a formula was supposed to look or be crafted. "It allows you to develop a style instead of inheriting someone else's style," Buzantian adds.

As master perfumers, both she and Frémont continue to help develop the next generation of perfumers, as well as fostering a continuing sense of teamwork and family within their company. Frémont explains that master perfumers bring a holistic vision of the fragrance business beyond creation. This vision is increasingly important, Buzantian notes, as today's junior perfumers face increasing time constraints—the leisurely learning pace of past decades in which one might have had the time to explore numerous product categories and discover new insights is no more. And, she says, the less experience one has, the longer it takes to solve problems in a formulation, adding to the pressure on younger perfumers. Frémont notes that young perfumers will find that in the course of developing a fragrance one moves quickly past the aesthetic stage to the problem-solving stage. There, experience counts.

Meanwhile, Buzantian says, one must ensure that junior perfumers do not get too discouraged too early in their careers so that they give themselves a chance to "fall in love with it." Certainly, a thick skin is required to get anywhere in the industry. Buzantian notes that the key lesson she has learned as a perfumer is "perseverance, with a smile."

"There's a fine line between conviction and being stubborn," Frémont says of what he has learned. "Listening is very important. Communication is very important. You can be the best perfumer, but if you can't communicate what you do—or understand what people are saying about your fragrance—it's impossible. Sometimes they [the client] see something in the fragrance that you don't because they experience the fragrance much more [fully] than we do. They're launching one product and we're working on [several] different ones. Their vision—even if it's not technical—there's always something to learn from a client or consumer wearing the fragrance and saying something about it. Our job is to interpret what is said, to find what needs to be fixed in the formula." Buzantian adds, "They [the clients] have a vision of where they want to go; and, in partnership, we are able to bring that vision to reality."

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