

The Last Word: Don Latici, a Career in Perfumery

“**W**hen I first started as a perfumer, you had to serve five years as an apprentice,” says perfumer Don Latici, who recently retired from drom after more than 30 years, closing a book on a career that has traced the trajectory of American postwar perfumery.

Latici began his fragrance career at the Fuller Brush Co. in inventory control. The company soon decided to open its own perfume lab under the direction of perfumer Andre Mallegol. The opportunity offered Latici—who had studied engineering, chemistry and business—a small bump in pay. Mallegol wrote the formulas and Latici compounded them, learning along the way how to smell and relate materials to one another. Eventually, Latici began to receive assignments, learning to make consistent formulas. Spending time in the fragrance and cosmetic labs and working on small teams taught him how to resourcefully troubleshoot problems.

Latici later moved to Givaudan, which was just growing its U.S. perfumery lab for soaps, detergents and other products. Working under perfumer Victor DiGiacomo, Latici learned to assess chemicals coming out of the company’s internal manufacturing, discerning varying qualities of ingredients and determining in which products lower grades might be appropriate, such as bar soaps. He, along with his fellow perfumers, performed development and evaluations for customers such as Amway, P&G, Lever, Clorox and Dial.

Latici then spent time in perfumery at Perry Brothers, before moving to Robertet, which offered expertise in natural materials. As a perfumer there, Latici formulated for products such as creams, lotions and shampoos. In educating himself on naturals, Latici learned to distinguish qualities of key materials such as lavender and oakmoss for different customer needs and price points. At the time, he says, some formulas could have as much as a 20% natural load.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Latici says, “Formulas then were maybe 10 items long, but within that list there may have been three bases, and within those bases there may have been three more bases. That was the standard method of development and everybody worked that way.”



Don Latici

Moving to drom in 1981, Latici represented the company’s desire to produce fragrances formulated 100% in the United States, rather than sending bases from Europe that would be rounded off locally. The nascent U.S. team included a compounder, an analytical person, Latici and a salesperson. The company had some business with Mary Kay and worked in categories such as room deodorizers, soaps and cosmetics. At

no time did the company seriously consider pursuing flavors or raw materials. By 1986, drom had constructed an automated site in the United States and focused on mid-tier projects. Latici handled perfumery, sales and safety, until some of those other duties were assumed by a growing staff. In the 1990s, drom added perfumers such as Jean-Louis Grauby and president James Dellas. The company continued to expand to a staff that numbers about 45 today.

Throughout this history, Latici has seen consumer lifestyles and product development change. Those that haven’t kept up have lost their edge, he believes: “Small companies come in and take chunks from big companies.”

He adds, “Today, it’s much different. There are schools in Europe, like [Institut Supérieur International du Parfum de la Cosmétique et de l’Aromatique Alimentaire] that teach chemistry and its application in perfumery. It takes many, many years to get a mind that understands what works, what doesn’t work. Our industry will survive, but it takes so much more skill now in terms of testing, safety and analysis.”

Latici continues, “The business cycle is now so different. You have to hit the ground running. There’s [little] on-the-job training. The customers are highly demanding now; if they give you a project, they want it in two weeks. We’re talking about things that used to take a month. Two weeks is a long time in today’s market—most customers want [projects] back within a week.”

Regulatory pressures, too, have evolved. “It wasn’t until the mid-1970s that [the Research Institute for Fragrance Materials (RIFM)] became very active,” Latici says, heralding the age of safety testing and centralized data. “There was a lot of science going on behind the scenes.”

This inevitably meant that certain materials began to vanish from the palette, a regulatory process in which Latici participated. By the 1990s, he recalls attending a RIFM meeting and witnessing the growth of full life cycle analyses of ingredients, fragrances and fragranced products. “Things,” he told a colleague, “are never going to be the same.”

Still, Latici says, if the industry hadn’t had the foresight to address testing and safety concerns, perfumery could have faced even worse consequences: “Everybody is affected by it. Perfumers have to be really skillful in finding replacements.”

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