

Blocki: The American Perfumer

How the revival of an American perfumery brand pays homage to the past in order to progress to the future.

It's the turn of the century and the belle époque ("the beautiful era") is unraveling the corset-tight rigidity of the Edwardian era through an influx of novel art, design and innovation. Creativity in art, fashion and perfumery is at an all-time high. Fashion is incorporating looser fitted and practical designs inspired by the independent, athletic and feminine woman as seen by Madame Vionnet's bias cut dress and Mademoiselle Gabrielle Chanel's sporty tweed suits.

The perfumery game is changing, too, with the introduction of ionones, aldehydes and other synthetic ingredients that allow perfumers to produce formulations with new olfactory facets in larger quantities. As a curious chemist and creative artist, John Blocki of Blocki Perfumes is leading the way in American perfumery with creations that pay homage to both the European past and American present.

One hundred and fifty years later, Blocki Perfumes' creative vision is being reinvented by Blocki's great-great grandson, Tyler Kraemer, and his wife, Tammy Kraemer, and perfumer Kevin Verspoor, a modern day Renaissance man, whose many artistic talents include drawing, sculpting and painting. In 2000, Verspoor was called upon by the Kraemers to create a modern facet to Blocki Perfumes. Inspired by trending notes of the time, like violet, lilac and lily of the valley, Verspoor worked with Berjé



The reinvention of Blocki Perfumes balances the past and present through its vintage aromas and intricate packaging details.

to blend his own creative and scientific background with the beauty, depth and artistry of Blocki's past creations.

A Fragrant History

In comparison to European brands, American perfumery was a young blossom in the early 1900s. The industry was faced with many challenging factors like tariffs and trade practices, an obstacle especially troublesome for American perfumery, explains Tyler Kraemer. As an industry advocate, John Blocki absorbed the burgeoning global industry with nods toward France, the leader of the market at that time, especially, notes Verspoor, with floral perfumes like *Q'uel de Fleurs*. Yet, when it came time to create his own perfumes and toiletries, Blocki combined his acute sense of market insight, chemistry background and creativity to revolutionize American perfumery.

Blocki began his career at 14 when he apprenticed for the pharmacist F.A. Wheeler in Sheboygan, Wisconsin. It was with Wheeler that Blocki's chemistry and pharmaceutical background took root. Blocki eventually moved to Chicago where, at the budding age of 20, he opened his own retail pharmacy, Blocki, Dietzche & Co, specializing in high-quality chemicals, perfumes, essences and essential oils.

The Perfume Palace is Born

Blocki's reputation as a skilled and innovative perfumer eventually led him to open his own perfume shop on Chicago's prestigious Michigan Avenue with his son Frederick. The duo soon dropped the chemical and pharmaceutical portion of the business to focus solely on perfumery. In 1895, John Blocki & Son was born.

As the first and only retail perfume shop in Chicago at the time, John Blocki & Son was connected to a working laboratory.



An original Blocki perfume bottle, packing and advertisement.

Retailers and customers would flock to the shop, nicknamed the “perfume palace,” with its eye-catching window displays and wafts of floral and citrus aromas.

Along with his renowned talents as a chemical compounder, Blocki was also known in Chicago and New York City for his advocacy of the industry. With acute knowledge of the market’s patterns, Blocki served as vice president of the Manufacturing Perfumer’s Association in New York and as the first president of the Perfumery, Soap and Extract Makers’ Association of Chicago.

Patented Perfumery Packaging

Producing hundreds of fine fragrances and toiletries, Blocki’s perfumes were coveted by millions. With accords like violet, lily of the valley and citrus, each perfume was housed in equally elegant and beautiful packaging, which, according to Tammy Kraemer, involved one of the first perfume packaging patents in the United States.

In each bottle, Blocki included a preserved natural flower that served as one of the main notes in the fragrance. As a chemist, his idea for a preserved flower also prevented essential oil evaporation. As a marketer, this was Blocki’s solution to prevent the deterioration or loss of the brand identity. According to Tyler Kraemer, the flower also signaled “perfumery” to the influx of immigrants arriving to the States.

Prosaic Perfume

The Empress Floral Perfumes and Toilet Waters and Flower-in-the-Bottle perfumes were among Blocki’s most popular fragrance lines. He also created a sample set of four fragrances, each with its own bottled flower, housed in a miniature book aptly titled, “The Story of the Flower by John,” comprising violet, rose and orange blossom accords.

Blocki’s 2015 reinvention continues its musings from literature, taking cues from Blocki’s mother, Emma Blocki’s journals. Her prosaic memoirs are the inspiration behind the three perfumes: *this grand affair*, *for walks* and *in every season*.

Verspoor took into account Emma Blocki’s evocative, nostalgic and poetic writing in the creation of each perfume. Referring to classic notes of that time, the perfumer paid close attention to the oriental accords that were popular in fashion and perfume.

Perfumes in 1912–1913 were loaded with florals, including orange blossom, lilac, rose and jasmine, says Tammy Kraemer.

Just like Blocki, Verspoor explains that he used the highest quality essential oils and absolutes and incorporated modern twists by using modern molecules and accords such as mint.

Verspoor explains that he was inspired by the moment, by the past and by history’s renowned visionaries like perfumer Francois Coty, and the art deco architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright. Bright florals like violets were the most popular notes in Blocki’s catalog. Verspoor says these notes were specifically chosen as constants throughout the fragrances as a tribute to Blocki’s work.

Blocki Perfumes circa 2015

Rich layers in both packaging and fragrance formulation give Blocki Perfumes their depth.

“One layer is Emma’s memoir and the other is walking through the time periods from the late 1800s to early 1900s,” says Tammy Kraemer.

This grand affair veers away from the traditional oriental fragrances, which include soft amber and powdery notes, says Verspoor. Instead, the fragrance adds a contemporary twist to oriental accords with brighter citrus notes like neroli, tangerine and pink grapefruit. Small fractions of patchouli notes add a fresh, clean and full dimension, while bergamot rounds out the fragrance as the top note.

“If I had to give a picture of the American life, I would compare it with the situation at the resort...It was a festival for eight days, celebrated by water rides, illuminations, fireworks, etc...” -Excerpt from Emma Blocki’s memoir for *this grand affair*



Each perfume includes a printed excerpt from Emma’s memoir.

“One layer is Emma’s memoir and the other is walking through the time periods from the late 1800s to early 1900s,” says Tammy Kraemer.

For walks is inspired by the fresh, green, woody and earthy notes of a hail storm experienced by Tyler Kraemer. Verspoor translated this experience by using a slightly fruity violet and iris, boronia, various parts of violet leaf and a small dose of methyl ionone, which helps elongate the fragrance, giving it a burst of cold, crisp energy.

“...We took a walk into the forest where we... gathered moss, ivy, forest violets, crowfoots and anemones...and so the beautiful spring began for all of us.” -Excerpt from Emma Blocki’s memoir for *for walks*.



The sample set “The Story of the Flower by John,” includes four fragrances, each with its own preserved flower in violet, rose and orange blossom accords.

In every season also includes bright and floral notes, like violet, but with a warmer, woodsier twist, like musk.

“A giant chestnut tree with its magnificent flowers was in front of the house. There was also a little flower garden in which stood a comfortable equipped linen tent...It gave us pleasure in every season.” -Excerpt from Emma Blocki’s memoir for *in every season*.

A Little Magic

As a result of the Great Depression and both World Wars, John Blocki closed down his business in the late 1940s. However, fragrance transcends time, allowing Verspoor to blend his own creativity and passion for perfumery and art for each formulation.

“Because [perfumery] is an art form, one must understand the classics to understand them well,” Verspoor says. “As an artist you study the classics to know the foundation. Without understanding the fragrances that come from the past, without understanding how a green fragrance could fit for the American

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—Kevin Verspoor



Each bottle comes with a printed card, evoking the past through color and image.

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Whether it’s evoking Emma Blocki’s emotions in each layer of the fragrance or creating an art deco-inspired bottle, Blocki Perfumes’ reinvention is rooted in creating a tactile experience and, as Tammy Kraemer says, “a little magic.”

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