

# The Commercial History of Grasse

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**A**mong all the cities of the Alpes Maritimes, Grasse is a town whose situation is the most interesting.

To the north, the mountains enlarge its property with many parallel ridges, separated by narrow valleys, interrupted by large plateaux. The chalky soil scratched by defilés, bored with grottos and pot-holes, has permitted the establishment of a wide underground network of drains, channelling water to Grasse.

To the south, towards the sea, hillocks and vast plains shape the foreland of Grasse, where many villages are still under its economic influence.

Sited at 350 meters above sea level, on a mound (the Puy hillock) a kind of platform overlooking the countryside, twelve miles from the sea, close to the sources, Source de la Foux, Grasse has been a fortified town since 1047, an assembling area for the populations once threatened by Moorish invaders.

The Zone between Le Puy and the Bd du Jeu de Ballon (the active main thoroughfare) is the old heart of the city not only from an historical point of view but from the economical sphere as well. It is the part of the town where visitors will find the most medieval reminders. Its growth took place in the 12th century; the second step, by the end of the 13th, early 14th century.

By the end of the medieval period, the surrounding ramparts were almost continuous; out of the seven doors, only one exists today, known as "Porte Neuve" (the new door) as it was enlarged in 1763.

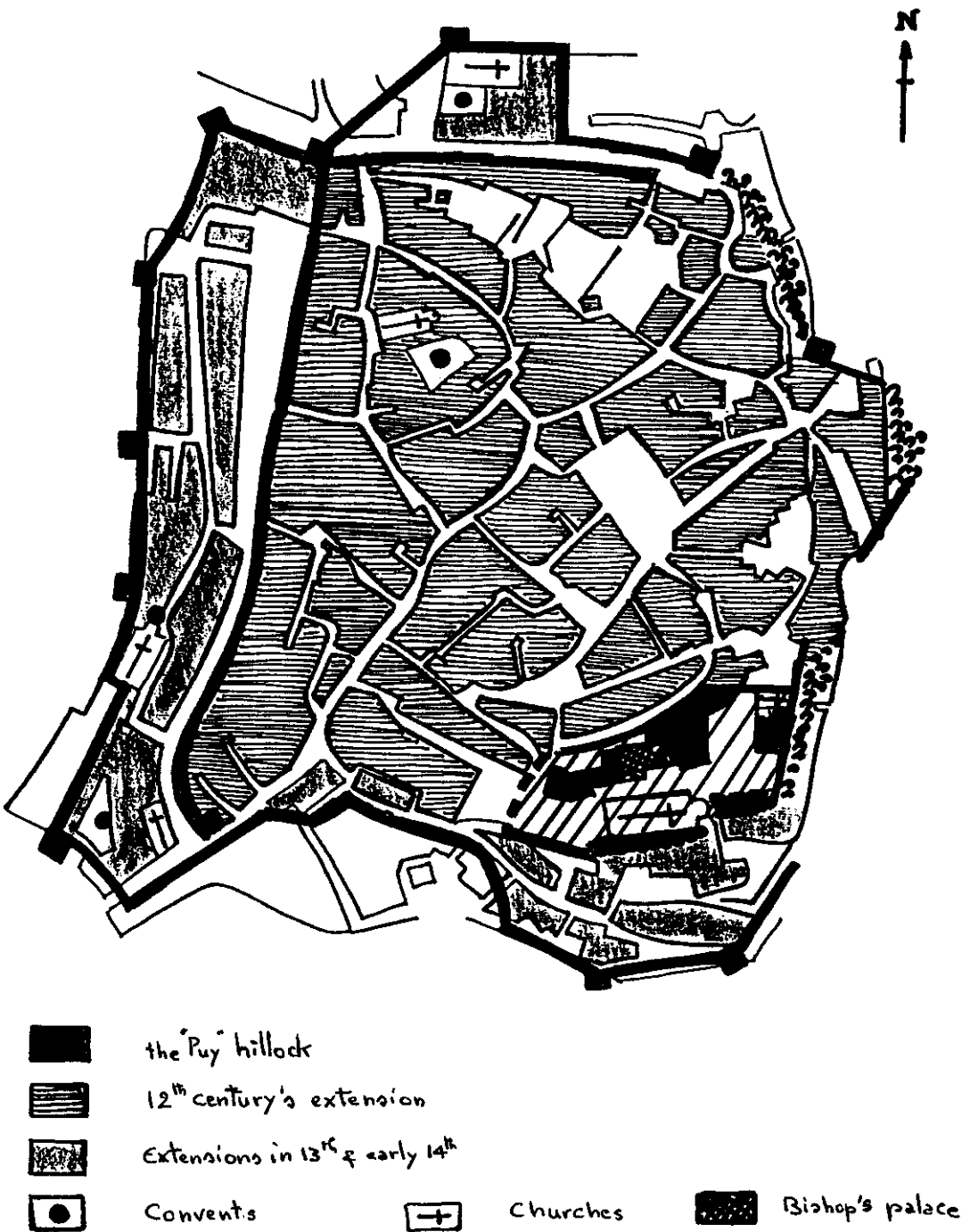
Convents and nunneries are typical of the medieval cities. If the prosperity or the wealth of a town can be calculated from an economical point of view, by the numbers of "non-productive mouths" is the fact that three convents existed before the middle of the 13th century proof of the opulence of Grasse? Franciscan in 1220, Dominican in 1236 and Austin friars in 1259 were followed between 1605 and 1634 by the Capuchins, the Ursulines and the Oratorians.

They had varying fortunes and, during the French Revolution, many of their buildings were sold by auction to some perfumery houses (ex. Bruno Court).

If agriculture was, as in most countries, the first activity of a rich and sunny land, trade and industry were, at the time, allied to the agricultural productions.

Vines and olive trees were cultivated on terraced hillside, while cereals (wheat, barley, rye and especially corn) were raised in the neighbouring valleys. Trade in olive oil with all the allied services will last for centuries! During the

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19th century, there were 150 olive mills and 122 flour mills.

Nevertheless, Grasse was soon to be in business with the outside world. Due to the abundance of water the working of leathers was one of the two first industrial activities of the town. The other was the manufacture of cloth and sheets (4000 meters yearly in the 16th Century). Commercial agreements were settled in 1179 with Genova and Pisa, Italy.

In 1260 the corporative statutes described tannery and skindressing. Skins were bought in Genova (since 1209), Sicilia, Spain and the Middle East. Tanning was done with oak bark, leaves of lenticus (or mastic-tree, a small evergreen tree with twisted twigs, typical of the mediterranean scrub) or with sumac (another local bush whose leaves turn red in autumn).

Trade was done via Marseilles, as Antibes was only a naval port and Cannes just a fishermen shelter. Grasse is the center of a strong local commerce and Antibes' bishops have lived there since 1243.

Local statistics showed 6,500 inhabitants in 1323 and one can read that the city could hold its own, compared to Marseilles, in skin dressing and soap works due to the excellence of its oils (mainly olive oil). Grasse was considered as one of the prettiest and richest towns in Provence.

A decline of the tanner's activity, close to collapse, was to happen in the second half of the 14th century. This was mainly due to wars. One must not forget that Grasse was the nearest fortified town to the border which at that time was the river Var, close to Nice. Nice was then part of the Country of Savoie. Land forces from Louis the 13th, Louis the 14th, and Louis the 15th pillaged on their way to Italy. Furthermore, plague broke out in the area twice. In 1580 there were only 5000 inhabitants.

However a few years later business started again and this new expansion lasted until the 18th Century. Skins came from Portugal and America. The strength of Grasse's famous "green leathers" (a specific colour obtained during processing) were reknown as far as Lyon. More than 50,000 rawhides were processed during 1750, in 72 tan-yards!

It was during the 16th Century that the popularity of perfume became evident: leather jackets, doublets, purses, shoes, gloves had to be perfumed for the end-users wishing to be "in mode." I read that the Count of Oxford returned to England with perfumed gloves which were given to Queen Elisabeth the First. The Queen was so pleased that she had her portrait made wearing these gloves! So says a local chronicler!

Queen Elizabeth also requested the creation and protection of the perfumery industry in England!

In Grasse, the tanners were quick to re-name themselves as "glove makers-perfumers." This new cottage industry could expand far more easily than in other towns where tan-yards exist, as the climate here allowed flowers' cultivation.

The "glove makers-perfumers" industry expanded during the 17th and 18th century, and definitely superseded the tanners whose downfall was enforced by new special taxes assigned not only on all tanned leathers but on the 18 month stock of crude skins as well. In 1818 only two tanneries remained in activity!

Although the perfumers' statutes were written in 1779, it is after the Revolution (1789) that perfumery reached an industrial scale, during a century of economical and political stability.

In 1790 Grasse had 11,875 inhabitants, representing 21% of the population of the area.

Important plantations of bitter orange trees had been set up in the early 16th century mainly for the processing of scented pomades used in the leather industry. Under the impulse of the glove-makers, new plantings took place: rose and jasmin, violettes, jonquils, narcissus, hyacinth and tuberoze.

The British agronomist, Edward Young, pitiless towards Provence in his work "Travels in France" only showed interest for the Grasse area " . . . there is an uncommon exception, the gardens Grasse . . . orange trees and roses are subject of intensive cultivation . . ." These plantations continued to expand during the 19th and early 20th century though land was scarce!

How were all these flowers processed?

The early extraction was in fact a hot maceration of flowers. A mixture of lard and tallow was heated with some oil at 60° Centigrade. Bitter orange flowers were then added and mingled for two hours. The next day flowers were removed and processing was repeated many times. This type of extraction lasted until the end of the 19th century, but very quickly another process, still using fat, replaced the initial one. It is known as "Enfleurance."

The enfleurance system was mainly applied to flowers that are too delicate to withstand exposure to heat.

This was, and is still the case for jasmin and tuberoze, whose petals continue to develop and give off perfume even long after they have been harvested.

A fatty or greasy base, having a high absorbant ability and a certain viscosity (250 gr), is spread on a glass plate (30 x 30 inches). Fresh flowers are

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sprinkled on the layer and left for 24 hours. The flowers are then picked off by hand and replaced by fresh flowers. The processing was repeated 30 to 40 times before the fragrance-saturated fat was removed from the trays. This saturated fat is known as "Pomade." It was washed afterwards with alcohol and the fragrance concentrated by evaporation of the alcohol. This process, too, was abandoned around 1940 due to the exorbitant labour charges.

The third processing method used was distillation. Distillation has been known for centuries and even in 1760, the "glovemakers" were selling "scented waters" at Beaucaire's fair, the biggest fair of Provence. These scented waters were in fact the crude waters from distillation of the wild plants growing in the mountains, i.e., lavender, spike, rosemary, thyme, mint or sage. They were obtained with very rudimentary stills, generally heated by direct fire.

In 1830 improvements were affected in distillation by using layer stills. At the same time country people were cultivating more flowers, such as verbena or geranium, to compensate the shortage of wild plants.

In 1846, 61 factories are recorded: forty-nine in Grasse, three in Mougins (half way to Cannes), six in Cannes. They had been producing 1,000,000 liters of bitter orange water, 4,000 kilos of pomade, and 180,000 soaps tablets.

In 1860 steam was used for distillation. Produced in a boiler separate from the still, steam was blown through the plant material which rests on a grid for quick removal after completion. There was far less risk of burning the plant material, than in the primitive open fire method.

These distillers may be considered as the first factory owners of Grasse.

In 1864, the national railway track opened, and seventy-seven factories are recorded in 1866 (out of which sixty-five located in Grasse).

Another new processing method made its way in 1880/1890: the extraction by volatile solvents (the most frequently used solvents being petrol ether or benzene).

Initially in copper, then in stainless steel tanks, the natural raw materials were soaked with solvent (150 kilos of material for 750 liters of solvent). The resulting product after evaporation of the solvent is known as concrete (or resinoid), a usually solid waxy mass, containing all the hydrocarbon-soluble and odorous matters of the plants.

A washing of the concrete with alcohol led after a subsequent cold filtration and recovering of alcohol to a highly concentrated product: the absolute.

New products were processed and used in perfumery such as oakmoss derivatives, hay, carnation, mimosa, honeysuckle and even broom formerly used for baking.

In those days flower cultivations were expanding not only around Grasse but in the mountains with the planting of lavender, and, later, lavandin (1920).

On more than 1600 acres were collected: 800 tons of jasmin flowers (8000 flowers for 1 K° by weight), 1000 tons of roses, 250 tons of violet leaves, 1800 tons of orange flowers, and 150 tons of tuberose.

In Grasse almost everybody worked for the perfumery industry: tinsmiths, glass makers, cork cutters, printers, forwarding agents, iron mongers and so on.

In the factories, men, from father to son, worked ten hours a day, six days a week.

In 1900, Grasse had almost 14,000 inhabitants and sales reached 25,000,000 Francs.

In the 1920s, new factories subsidiaries were settled in Algeria, Congo, Haiti, Tunisia, Reunion island. Their output was brought back to Grasse.

Fractionated-distillation, under vacuum, enabled isolation of the main constituents of some essential oils.

In 1926, perfume factories were still working nine hours a day but closed at midday on Saturdays. New products appeared on the market: cognac oil, (wine lees oil), tagete oil, castoreum derivatives, opoponax oil. Grasse's turnover exceeded 350,000,000 Francs.

In 1936 workers were granted paid holidays and weekly working hours were limited to forty. The industrial concerns, which in 1900 had been personally directed by the owner (the boss), with the able assistance of one proxy, were run by various managers: commercial manager, purchase manager, financial manager, technical manager.

Grasse had 20,000 inhabitants and turnover reached 600,000,000 Francs (1936).

In 1939/1940, during the war, trade was difficult. The perfume factories tried to substitute the missing imported oils by processing local products. Thus, from lavandin oil, whose production reached 140 tons (against 1 T in 1924), linalol and linalyl acetate were isolated to replace bois de rose or bergamotte oils.

But when the war was over, the Grasse industry had to face severe competition on their traditional export markets. Some foreign countries began protecting their newly expanding local production. New synthetics competed against more costly naturals.

Some of the factories, remembering the old times, when, apart from processing pomades or distilled water, they had produced canned food (mainly tomatoes), began to move into flavors. Some of them specialized, others followed bearing in mind that nowadays "whatever you eat or drink is flavoured".

Unfortunately, some firms were facing difficulties and merged into bigger concerns:

A. Chiris—UOP (1967)—Naarden (1978)—Sanofi (1980)

Bertrand Freres—PPF (1967)

Lautier—Rhone Poulenc (1970)—Florasynt (1980)

Roure Bertrand F.—Hoffman-La Roche

Tombarel—Sanofi (1982)

Mero Boyveau—Sanofi (1982)

Camilli Albert Laloue—Pfizer (1957-64)

It would appear to have been beneficial to all of them.

In 1982, with the dozen factories still existing, the turnover of Grasse perfumery was in excess of 1,700,000,000 Francs (average of exports over 50%).

Grasse perfumery which lost the monopoly for the cultivation of its flowers, then the monopoly for the processing of essential oils, still keeps a prominent part in the trade of essential oils.

A very old dream for an international museum of perfumery is now becoming reality. In an old building, where 150 years ago the commercial premises of the Hugues Aine factory was located, is and will be settled, among many others, a working specimen of all the main apparatus used in the trade, two perfumer's organs, lab equipment, a very rich collection of finished products, a botanic garden with all the various species of subtropical plants, and a lot of documentation naturally available to researcher and historian.

#### Acknowledgement

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