

INTERVIEWS 

LIQUID EMOTION, CULTURAL ARTIFACT: A CONVERSATION WITH FRAGRANCE TAXONOMIST MICHAEL EDWARDS

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PUBLISHED NOVEMBER 14, 2024

INTERVIEWS, FRAGRANCE, RESOURCES



Michael Edwards



Nowhere does scent come alive quite as magically as in the mind of fragrance historian, taxonomist, expert, and author Michael Edwards. If perfumers are the orchestra, Edwards is its conductor, directing their output as to have the most profound effect on the listener. With a deep timbre and animated intonations, an engaging flow of dates, names, and anecdotes, hearing him speak about scents makes the bottles themselves come to life; the intertwining swirls of myth and legend, inspiration and creativity, history and future promise dancing in front of one's very eyes. Evelyn Lauder dubbed him "the perfume expert's expert," but Edwards humbly calls himself a "backroom boy" who builds professional tools for the industry.

Those who have come across his written work can attest to his talent in conveying the intricate political, social, and historical backdrops to the evolution of fragrance. Using perfumes like pit stops in a sensory history of culture and creation, Edwards' conversations with the most revered talents of the industry are transformed into a thrilling joyride through the fragrances of the decades.

A biochemist by trade, he began as a product manager at a global multinational, the Beecham Group in the 1960s, intrigued by fragrance's potential to set a product apart, particularly while working on shampoos. Later, as fragrance director at Halston in the 1970s, customer conversations led to him creating The Fragrance Wheel featuring 14 different fragrance families, from dry woods to soft amber. While the three main fragrance families (woody, floral, amber) had been a point of discussion among industry circles, never before had they been explored with such scope and precision. Edwards also added the fresh fragrance family into the mix. His classification criteria has helped brands, retail personnel, and the general public define and explain scent creations in an industry where language and subjectivity provide the tricky friction points of translating desire into outcome.

These classifications took a hardcover form with the *Fragrances of the World* guidebook, first published in 1984 with 323 women's fragrances. Subsequent printings were made to accommodate the ever-growing sea of releases. The latest edition, for the combined years of 2020 and 2021, contained over 5,000 scents. Taking a leap from guide to historian, *Perfume Legends II: French Feminine Fragrances*, first published in 1996, took readers behind the curtain of the elusive industry selling dreams in liquid form. Today, perfumers may be rock stars in their own right, but when Edwards wrote *Perfume Legends II*, the people behind the bottle were unknown beings behind the scenes. "There is no book like it," Edmond Roudnitska, the famous perfumer of creations like Dior's Eau Sauvage (1966) proclaimed. The publication was updated in 2019 to include 8 new

legends for a total of 52 fragrances, ranging from 1882's Fougère Royale by Houbigant to 2010's Portrait of a Lady by Editions de Parfums Frédéric Malle. Not only does Edwards extensively explore the making of the juice itself, naturally including an illustrated droplet displaying its composition from head to soul notes, but also its bottle design. More than a simple retelling, Edwards does an extensive recount of the story behind the product, from the perfumers, creatives, journalists, and other industry players who witnessed their impact firsthand.

In 2004, Edwards launched the online database of Fragrances of the World. It is updated daily and contains over 50,000 fragrances, with Edwards and his team of evaluators constantly smelling new releases. Scents are classified by family, note, and sub-note, with an olfactive pyramid, the perfumer, and bottle designer included, among other data points. The online database, which won the FiFi Award for Technological Breakthrough, also contains a Match My Fragrance option to assist in finding scent synonyms.

His newest book, *American Legends: The Evolution of American Fragrances*, opens with the statement: "To the French, perfume is liquid art; to the Italians, liquid style; to the Americans, it is liquid money." Beginning in the 1700s, when it was deemed "the devil's elixir" by Puritans, and its humble beginnings in local apothecaries around the 1750s, Edwards traces the liquid's evolution into the multibillion dollar industry we know it as today. In the foreword, Leonard Lauder describes the book as a "love story" and states: "The fragrance industry owes huge gratitude to Michael for his decades of dedication to the topic." Edwards conducted the interviews over the course of 27 years, extracting the stories behind scents like Elizabeth Arden's Blue Grass, a 1934 spicy floral inspired by her passion for horses and flowers, to the 2011 blockbuster Santal 33 by Le Labo capturing the spirit of the American West, which Edwards writes "marks a change of generations." The book cites the inspirations behind 39 scents in total, but effortlessly weaves them into the fabric of American history and culture. From niche brands like Bond No.9 to behemoths like Estée Lauder, the diverse spectrum of fragrance houses that built the modern-day American perfume market are on display.

Based between Paris and Sydney, Edwards works with some of the biggest names in the fragrance business: Robertet, Givaudan, and Symrise, to name a few. Passionate about remaining impartial and independent, Edwards accepts no advertisements or consulting work, nor does he charge brands for listing them. With over four decades of industry experience, he still exudes an infectious passion and enthusiasm for all things scent. The esteemed expert sat down with BeautyMatter to discuss the parallels between wine and

scent, the push and pull between the American and French fragrance industries, and why American Legends is his MBA in perfumery.

What was the process of categorizing and classifying over 50,000 fragrances?

It sounds unbelievable, but little things start and they grow, and suddenly you're into it. Like most good things, it starts by accident. In the '70s, early '80s, I was working for Halston when Halston was a huge brand. My job was rolling out the fragrances to the various Max Factor affiliates around the world, so I would spend a lot of time in department stores whenever I visited. One of the questions I asked people is: What's your favorite perfume? What do you wear? It gets them talking. If they gave me three, four, or five fragrances again and again, I noticed that at least two or three of them belonged to the same fragrance family. I wasn't a genius—there really weren't that many fragrances 40 years ago.

I remember that the year after I created my first guide in 1984, there were only 29 new fragrances. Last year, there were well over 3,000. The whole business has changed. So it wasn't difficult to know that this person had a particular [fragrance] family. I'd always been fascinated by wine and my goddaughter had been a master of wine. The logic is that if you enjoy wines, somebody asks, What do you prefer, red wine or white wine? You say, Oh, I like white wines. Which ones? Chardonnay. Each one has got its own character. When you think of it, would it not be illogical, if you like a white chardonnay, to offer you a red shiraz? It's dumb, but that's what we're doing in perfume, because there was no common language for fragrance. There still isn't.

The brands then and now describe their fragrances quite differently. It's a cacophony of confusion. But suddenly it came to me, maybe the key is to find out the family of fragrance that somebody prefers, because once I know that, then I can offer them two or three fragrances from that family that I'm pretty sure they're going to like one of them. That was how it started.

I got downsized. Halston was part of Norton Simon and they got acquired by another one. I didn't want to continue in corporate and so I set up on my own. Remember, this was the start of perfumery. I mean, the '70s were really when it all started, exploding by the end of the '80s.

Enter the '70s, women were buying more fragrance for themselves than men were spending on giving it to them. That transformed the whole fragrance business around the world. That was when I started. I thought, wow, this would be a cute idea to develop and

talk to the various buyers, the consultants. The only problem was there was no guide at that stage. There was a marvelous guide from Haarmann and Reimer, *The H&R Genealogy*. But it had become quite technical. It was difficult for most people to understand. The French Society of Perfumers had a superb classification, but they didn't update it that frequently, and it was limited primarily to French fragrances. And so in '83, I worked most of the year and put together my guide. I know it sounds brilliant, but I'd been in the fragrance field a long time. There weren't that many fragrances.

I went out and I presented it to product managers. Chanel was one of the first to say, come and talk to us and to the buyers at department stores and great perfumeries. They liked it and started to use it. The next year, they asked if I could update it and I did that and the next year and next year. Then in 1988, Nordstrom found a copy. Don't ask me how, they said, "We like it. Can you add more American perfumes?" I did. In '91, they said, "Can you add men's fragrances?" And so I became the first to match women's and men's. Why? Because the reality is then and now, the customers of these great department stores and perfumeries, 80% to 85% of them are women.

You probably heard me say before that women then and now, have very little faith in the fragrance judgment of the men in their life. They tend to buy for men what they like and we get used to it. That's why I match the men's fragrances to the women's fragrances. It's easy to say to a lady, "If you enjoy this, next time you're looking for a gift, why don't you try this." If you're in the flow and you're seeking to update it, as you look back, you think, oh, over 50,000 fragrances. But it evolved. Today, I have a team of evaluators. They leave next week. In fact, two of them have been at Pitti in Florence this past week, and then four of them will be at the Tax Free [World Association] show.

We work very closely with all the brands, but we remain independent and impartial. We make no charge for listing or classifying fragrances. You must wonder what my business model is. But we create cutting-edge fragrance finder content for sites around the world. We do Sephora in the UK, Boots and The Perfume Shop, for example. The two biggest in the States, Macy's and Ulta. In association, we provide all the content for Wikiparfum, that marvelous guide that's now coming up around the world. That's really how we keep it up. It's relationships and we work closely with the brands. They tell us what's coming six or nine months ahead. They need to tell us, because otherwise we can't add their new fragrances to the content that we provide for Macy's and Sephora.

Especially with the books and the large volume of launches every year, do you have a framework in terms of deciding who to include, like are these fragrances that have made

significant contributions to the industry?

We make no criterion like that. We happen to include anything. I got, for example, 42 new fragrances from China just yesterday to include. We have to because our database is the resource that the industry, the oil houses, perfumers, and the brands use. Whether it's Chanel or L'Oréal, whether it's Coty or Estée Lauder, whether it's a small niche brand, most all of them refer to the Fragrances of the World database because it is the only comprehensive, impartial one. People like that. That's our point of difference, that's worked for us.

I'd love to talk about your most recent project, *American Legends*, and just ask you about the research process.

It's the same process for *Perfume Legends*. I became fascinated because I would go into the perfume oil houses, the Givaudans and Firmenichs, to check my classifications with the perfumers. Oh, I'd always been intrigued by the stories, the history of perfumery, and fascinated by the fact that so often they sounded so different and untrue. In the late '80s, early '90s, I would talk to them about their new perfumes, and to my surprise, they were willing to talk. Remember, if you would, that in the '80s, the '90s perfumers were invisible. The brands didn't talk about them. Today they're stars, but not then. I became more and more intrigued by the stories. In my mind I had the idea of a little booklet in which I would try to talk to the perfumers and understand the real stories behind the iconic fragrances.

I had the luck to interest Guy Robert, who at that time was president of the French Society of Perfumers. He was the great chap that made Madame Rochas, Caleche, early Gucci fragrances, Dioressence. Something clicked. I can't tell you the encouragement and help he gave me. He became my mentor, very close friend, and for the last 12 years of his life, my technical consultant for the database there. The other one was Edmond Roudnitska, the great perfumer. I never expected that he'd agree to receive me. He had a reputation of being a difficult man, but I found him enchanting. He gave me three interviews, and I mentioned those two, because without them, I reckon at least 100 out of the 250 people I spoke to would probably not have agreed to meet with me.

I spoke to the heads of houses. Maurice Roger, the genius who created Poison and Fahrenheit. I spoke to Philippe Guerlain. Vera Strubi, the angel of Angel. I spoke to the bottle designers like Pierre Dinand, the great perfumers like Jean-Paul Guerlain, and also the couturiers. Monsieur Saint Laurent, very briefly. Paco Rabanne, three interviews. Fascinating. Out of it came the book *Perfume Legends*. What's fascinating about it—and it's probably my finest work together with *American Legends*—it's the only book in which

you can actually absorb, read, and study the words of the creation. I'm just the word weaver, 80% of the text are the actual words of the creators. That had never been done before. How did I decide the fragrances to include? Well, that was simple.

These are the iconic fragrances that introduced a new note. Think, for example, of the tea note in CK One, for example. Think of Angel with that gourmand note. Or they introduced such a change in perfumery. Think of headspace with Antonia's Flowers. Or they made such an impact that they created a whole new trend, like Charlie or Poison. That was the selection I made. The first book came out in 1996. It was updated in 2019. It was. Even back in the '90s, I was starting to work on *American Legends*. My first interview was Joséphine Catapano, who created Youth Dew and Norell. That was in 1992. Why didn't I bring it out before? Because we got overwhelmed by the avalanche of new fragrances.

But Covid gave me the time, and now the two are there. For me, that is the one that I think will survive me, because there is no equivalent to it. It's almost my MBA in perfumery. If you come into perfumery, if you don't read those, if you don't study what the great creators have done, you'll never know what the business is all about.

Also, sometimes American perfumery has stood in the shadow of the pedigree and history of French perfumery. I hope that's not heartbreaking to say, but I feel like the impact of American perfumery hasn't fully always been acknowledged. A lot of times, there's this bias.

You're right. Fascinating stories. If you actually look at the two books side by side, the two can't go without each other. The Americans adore the sophistication, the subtlety of French perfumes. The French adore the money spell of American perfumes. It's the contrast. The Americans, again and again, are trying to do something that will conquer America. Think of Dior. Dior in 1947, with Miss Dior and the rest of it, Diorella, Diorissima, made no impact in America. It was too refined. Then Maurice Roger came out with the genius of Poison. Yah! And Fahrenheit, get into it! Well, it didn't last too long and he left the company after a while. It wasn't until J'adore of 2000, and then, of course, Sauvage, that suddenly Dior cracked it. Always they wanted to crack the market. Chanel, the same thing.

Coco Mademoiselle was aimed directly at the Americans. Opium for example, was directed by Americans back in 1976. And it was Saint Laurent who was encouraged by the chairman of the great drug company that owned it, Richard Furlaud. He was an American. One of the fascinating things is this excruciating tug between the two of them. France

could not do without the money of America, and America could not do without the subtlety and teaching of the French.

Would you describe that as the biggest revelation writing the book. What was the biggest insight or anecdote that surprised you when you were writing it?

You'll love the story of Giorgio. You know. Fred Hayman and his wife Gayle wanted the fragrance to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Beverly Hills Giorgio boutique. And Gayle took charge of the project. She spoke to oil house after oil house, but nothing that they came up with would please her. To me, she said, "What I want is a socko of a fragrance." Well, she added a few four-letter words, but you get the basic idea as to what she wanted on that. But it was going nowhere and the launch was due just a couple of months away. She hired a new consultant, David Horner, who had been Charles Revson's personal assistant. No, he didn't handle the mail. That meant that he sorted out all the financial stuff that Revlon wanted him to do.

He was a genius of a man, a close friend of mine. I love the guy. But he died, unfortunately, two years ago. Well, he was brought in, and he, too, tried to come up with oils that Gayle liked. He couldn't. Eventually he spoke to a colleague of his with whom he'd worked during Revlon days, Jack Friedman, who headed up Florasynth, the oil house. He'd done a number of great fragrances for Revlon: Charlie, Ciara, Jontue, brands like that. But he wasn't interested in the Giorgio fragrance. Giorgio was just one boutique. But eventually David was persuasive, and Jack said, "Okay, I'll give you one, but only one, and you may not change it." "Yeah, yeah," said David. You can imagine him. He was used to getting his own way. "No," said Jack Friedman. "No change."

The story of how David and Jack engineered things to finally get Gayle to accept it. For some reason, Jack Friedman never gave up on this fragrance. It was originally created as a proposal for Estée Lauder, a floral interpretation of Youth Dew. But Lauder turned it down. Friedman showed it to Marcella Borghese. Revlon looked at it for Scoundrel. Saint Laurent looked at it as a possible Paris interpret there. Helena Rubenstein looked at it, and each time it was slightly changed. But he never gave up on it. But he wouldn't tell me what it meant to him. For me, as I look at Giorgio, I think that it encapsulated the three great fragrances that Florasynth created for Revlon. It had the freshness of Charlie, 1976. It had the tuberose of Jontue, 1979, and it had the amber notes of Ciara. There are many stories in it that I think will fascinate you.

"The beauty about niche is that they've put back luxury into the perfume business."

BY MICHAEL EDWARDS, FRAGRANCE HISTORIAN, TAXONOMIST, AUTHOR

What we were talking about earlier in terms of the interplay between American and French perfumery, do you have any other thoughts on what the impact of American perfumery on the global fragrance landscape has been?

Absolutely. Well, first of all there is Estée Lauder. Today we tend to downplay American perfumes, because when you boil it down, there's only one great creative house in America: that's Estée Lauder. Bath & Body Works is more mass market, whereas in France, you've got Louis Vuitton group, Coty, Chanel, Dior, Parlux. That is one of the things that means that American perfumery has played a second fiddle. But two fragrances started the whole of American perfumery. The first was Estée in 1968. It was Mrs. Lauder's first foray into perfume. Not Youth Dew. When Youth Dew came out in '53, she was into skincare. That was her love, and she wanted a bath oil. That was a skin perfume. But her first real perfume that she was part of was Estée of '68. It was also the first American perfume that made the French perfumers sit up and take notice. When you look at some of the interpretations of Estée, think of First by Van Cleef & Arpels, that kind of went there. And Roure Bertrand Dupont's Geoffrey Webster, told me, for example, that he regarded Estée as the first American masterpiece.

But the other fragrance of significance that people overlook was Norell. It came out in '68 and it was Charles Revson, who had been the lip and nail man. His business was in drugstores and he wanted to crack the department stores where Lauder and the other brands were. He had licensed Norman Norell, who was the Balenciaga of American couture at that time there.

He created Norell, the perfume with Joséphine Catapano. But the twist in this is that no one expected it to succeed. Why? Because perfume, back at the end of the '60s, was a minor event. It was almost all in drugstores. Even Chanel No. 5 was a drugstore perfume back then. The great department stores, they sometimes came out with limited editions of their own or some of the great brands, but the consensus was that their customers, the ladies who lunched, really did not think much of perfume. Perfume was for their maids. Well, Norell hit the market. Explosive! Suddenly, the American corporate power started to look at this with new eyes on that. In many ways, it was Norell's success in department stores that helped Estée Lauder, because the department store Saks [Fifth Avenue] was her territory, and now they were interested in fragrance.

It was those two fragrances that led a decade of extraordinary achievement in America. Think of what happened. 1971, you had Aromatics Elixir. 1972, you had Aliage, the first sports fragrance. '72, you had Tea Rose. Did you ever smell Tea Rose? The impact of that fragrance, wow, you never let go of it. It was '72, that America went musk with Jovan Musk. '73 was Charlie and the world changed. Charlie, for the first time, spoke to women. Before Charlie, perfume was a gift. Women didn't buy perfume for themselves any more than they would send themselves a dozen roses at Valentine's Day. But Charlie marked the point at which American women, and then women worldwide, were moving from homemakers into the office, and Charlie said, give yourself a gift. It worked. By the end of the '70s, women were the dominant power.

Then came Private Collection, that particular time coming through. Then what about, for example, White Linen that followed '78, or Polo in 1978? What about Oscar de la Renta in '77 that transformed all our floral amber fragrances around the world? Then, of course, came the blockbuster of Opium in '77, and the world shuddered. It was our blockbuster, which was like *Jaws* the movie when it came out. So by the 1980s, American fragrances were dominant. Then they exploded! With Giorgio coming along in 1981, think of Elizabeth Taylor Passion in '87. Passion on its own might not have held the celebrity, but it was joined by White Diamonds. Between the two of them, she made more money out of her fragrances than from all her movies put together. But she really hustled.

I once asked John Ledes, the editor of *Beauty Fashion* magazine: What did she do? He says, "She just hustled in every store." The impact of that lady, I was at Dallas when Passion was launched and over 10,000 people were trying to storm the gates of Neiman Marcus to get in to see her. It was a phenomenon. That was the point at the end of the '80s when the market moved back to the French. The French had come up with great stuff in the middle [of that time period], for example, of L'Eau d'Issey in '92, Angel in '92. Think of

Tresor, the marvelous stuff there. But at the height of America, America almost took over French fragrances in the late '70s, early '80s. Sophia Grojsman [the perfumer behind Tresor] was the queen of roses and then the French took charge again. By that time, most of the perfumers were popping back and forth to work between New York and Paris, and the French got the scene.

I wanted to ask you about taking the term oriental off of the fragrance wheel following discussions around the problematic nature of the term, and now using the term amber fragrance. How important is it that the industry adapts to the current social and political conversations around diversity?

Remember, please, that each language entity has their own interpretation. I did that for the United States and for the United Kingdom. The best way I can explain to you why I did it is, firstly, because nobody else was doing it. So I figured, what the hell, let me take a punt and come out with it. It's time to change. I thought I'd be cut off at the knees, but CPL in England changed within a week. Then the American perfumers changed, and suddenly everybody was changing. But the impact of it, why I did it—at the World Perfume Congress in June, I was at one of the tables with a perfumer.

I'd never met her before and we spoke. Then I turned to my guest on the right, we spoke a little bit more and I happened to turn back to the perfumer and there was a tear on her cheek. I said, "What's wrong? Have I done something?" She said, "No." She leaned a little closer to me. She said, "You don't know what it means to be near to you." I'd never met her before, and I didn't know what this meant at all. I said, "Why?" She said, "You'll never know the impact of those words. It's time to change." I said, "Tell me." She was Asian, she was Chinese-Korean. She'd been educated in America, graduated, perfumery-trained in America.

But she said, "You know, for the last 8-10 years, walking through the street, it was quite normal for somebody to say, 'You f*cking ch*nk,' or stuff like that. Sometimes things would be thrown at me at school, there was antagonism when Trump was president, it got worse, because suddenly us Chinese, us Koreans were the problem. We asked the perfumers, please change oriental. But nobody did anything. We had talked closely to the perfumers, and we'd known that they were starting to get requests. Not just starting. For some time, the brands were saying, look, I'm nervous about this. Don't call it an oriental. But nothing happened." That's why, finally, being independent, impartial, I could afford to do it because I don't take money from any of the companies or the brands. I said, "It's time to change" for America, the English-speaking market. And I'm glad I did.

How important is it that we include international fragrance perspectives?

When you and I go down to Abu Dhabi and tell them that it's amber, they'll say, "Go away, it's oriental." That's fine.

Interesting, isn't it? We're certainly having lots of conversations around the Middle East already being a huge fragrance market. But there's also more eyes opening up to all these different fragrance practices around the world.

In the wheel for the Arabs, we would use the term floral oriental, not floral amber, because to them, that is their terminology. If you speak to the French, they think the Americans are silly because I don't think they've seen the passion, the power that this has had on a lot of Americans.

Speaking of those evolutions and growth of the industry, through the online world, we have this huge fragrance community that's grown. How do you see that increasingly educated consumer pushing for ingredient transparency within the industry?

Oh, that's a toughy toughy. What you want me to say, quite pompously, is there's so many people who know what they want and they're really into it. I don't believe it. I think that there's a small group of people, ecological warriors, who are fascinated and they're looking to get sustainability and details like that. But I suspect that for the vast number of perfumistas, it's the pleasure of perfume that is the key thing. It does worry me that, for example, coming out of Europe at the moment in the search of sustainability is a very real dictate that we must eliminate all different perfume bottles and we must only have perfumes in standard bottles. So Angel must be in the same standard bottle that Chanel No. 5 can be in now. I'm old, I'm in my 80s, I think it's bloody stupid.

I loathe that kind of attitude that's taken place. It's like some of the ingredients that we can no longer use. It's nonsense. Oakmoss, why can't we put a "be careful" label on it? Why do we have to ban the stuff? Why do we have to ban lilyal? Because a small group of people have an allergy. There are many other things for allergy. But people feel strongly about this. I remember once I was invited to a very elegant 50th birthday party with 100 people. I was seated between two ladies, one of whom told me, when I asked her that she was a worm manager, I said, "What's that?"

She said, "Well, I raise earthworms because you need to fertilize the crops. You need to fertilize all soil." And so she would sell bags of earthworms. It was a lovely conversation

until she asked what I did. It turned out that she had an extreme allergy to any perfumes, and suddenly she had somebody that she could berate. For the next 20 minutes, I was the ultimate criminal that had caused all this problem. Finally, she said to me, "I can't sit next to you," and decamped. I felt like an utter idiot. That kind of extreme color, it's not my life. So many great fragrances have gone because we can't make them. I mean, L'Heure Bleue would be the classic, one of the loveliest fragrances from the Belle Epoque, 1912. Givaudan has done a marvelous job in Mitsouko, but they can't do anything on L'Heure Bleue. The ingredients are just not there. Yeah, well, that's my popular ones today.

It's like you would remove the paint from the painter's palette and say, you can't paint with this color anymore. In terms of removing the red-velvet rope of the industry but then, at the same time, this idea of the magic of perfumery behind the scenes—will that always be happening? How does that feed into this notion of conversations around transparency that we have within the industry?

No problem if people want to get involved in that. Personally, I get bored by it, but I have the ability to say it doesn't interest me too much. Do I think perfumery will change? No. Do I believe it's an art form? Oh, yes. But it's also crass. Like any art, you can get the Sunday artist and you can get the real artists there. I went to an art show in Sydney a couple of weeks ago, it was billed as the place to catch up with contemporary culture. I walked through room after room after room thinking, is there something wrong with me, or is this just silly? Then I saw two works and they knocked me out. That can happen with any art and that can happen with perfume. For me, I was once asked, how would I describe perfume? And my answer was, then and now: perfume is liquid emotion.

Speaking of that liquid emotion, what do you think of dupe culture?

[laughs] Oh, isn't it gorgeous? Well, I guess that is liquid emotion. I'm going to save money. It's nothing new. Back in the '90s, for me, Mark Laracy had been a Vice President of Yves Saint Laurent in America, and he had worked on Opium. This would have been about '77, '78, '79. He had a fallout with Pierre Bergé, left the company, and said "I'm going to screw you." He came up with a company called Parfums de Coeur, [which translates to] perfumes of the heart. Impulse, the original deo spray, he came up with that one there. His Opium knockoff was beautiful there. He did a knockoff of Giorgio that, frankly, was better than the Giorgio one. There's always people who say, I can make it better. Let's face it. They can. They know the formula, because with technology today, they can get 90%, 92% of it. But there would be some things that they can't pick up. Where it usually falls down is, it doesn't last. The top note sounds good, but the base note and the

heart somehow don't have a good ring to it. But if it gives people pleasure, so be it. I'm sure the brands can find other ways to make money.

"The past is always for the future. Perfume evolves. People change, but emotion remains."

BY MICHAEL EDWARDS, FRAGRANCE HISTORIAN, TAXONOMIST, AUTHOR

The dupe or knockoff has always existed, it's maybe marketed more aggressively nowadays.

But there's a huge population that are now starting to like perfumes. I was talking to the Perfumist people and they're fascinated by the interest in Africa and some of the less-educated Asian countries in perfumes. In Nigeria, for example, they've had 60,000 people download that app. Now, as they say, these are not people that we can suggest you try Yves Saint Laurent or a Chanel fragrance, they wouldn't have dreamed of the money. They're predicting that, in fact, this is going to be the market for mass fragrances of the future. They're probably right.

Speaking of mass fragrances, you previously stated that a certain subset of niche will evolve into the mass fragrance category. I was wondering if you could elaborate on that statement because I found it very fascinating.

It's inevitable, because for me, niche now is the nursery school of fragrances. Niche started in the 1970s. There was Jean-François Laporte of L'Artisan Parfumeur in 1978. Then came Annick Goutal, 1981. 1994 came the first Jo Malone boutique, Serge Lutens was the first of the great houses tiptoeing into what was a PR ascent on the Palais Royale, 1992 in Paris. I've just gone back and looked at the numbers in the 1970s, we tracked 70 new niche perfumes. In the 1980s, that just doubled to 150. It doubled again in the '90s to

320. But if you remember that social media started in 2005, and the immediate impact was felt on the niche.

From 320 fragrances in the '90s, it jumped to 1,900 in the first 10 years, from 2000 to 2009. From 2010 to 2019, 10,600. What's happened is that the beauty about the niche is that people who loved fragrance found that they could create a brand for what would be, in corporate terms, peanuts. The two people behind Le Labo, those two Armani boys, between them they had just under \$200,000. But look at what they've created in Le Labo. It was inevitable once social media hit and once the niche brands got a showcase in American department stores. Why that happened? Because it's the Americans that created the niche market as we know it today. Suddenly there was this explosion coming through on this kind of thing there. Why did it work?

Well, number one, everybody came in, "Gee, it doesn't cost me much money. Maybe if I do something worthwhile, Estée Lauder or Coty will buy my company." But also remember that perfume has become so expensive to launch today that the major corporate groups are a little bit scared, the bean counters are hesitant. How much more sense does it make for you to go around all the niche brands at Esxence and places like that and just have a look and see: Is there anything like Le Labo or Byredo or Editions de Parfums Frederic Malle or Atelier Cologne that has a point of difference? Buy them up and then develop it. Look at what happened to Jo Malone 1994, her first fragrance, Nutmeg and Ginger. And look what happened when Lauder got hold of it and exploded her [brand].

Niche is the nursery school of new fragrances. These are the fine fragrances of tomorrow, but inevitably, the mass-market fragrances of tomorrow as well, because many of them don't have an arresting idea. It's inevitable that they won't be able to charge the price. Little by little, it'll come down. That was the reason why I said that.

Speaking of categories, how do you see the genres of niche and luxury blending over time?

Well, in fairness, luxury came about because suddenly these great brands saw niche and thought, wow, they had to have them to be serious in the game. You do know that it was the Americans who gave niche the showcase, that they exploded them. Are you familiar with that background?

When I think of one of the early niche fragrances, I think of L'Artisan Parfumeur, which is

obviously more French.

No, no. It all came about, L'Artisan Parfumeur, 1978, Annick Goutal, 1981, Etro, the first Italian [niche brand], 1989. Then came Serge Lutens in 2004, and Jo Malone. But these were tiny brands. You might have known about them, but 99% of people around the world knew nothing about them. They were little brands there, but they got a showcase in America by accident. It happened in the 1990s. The 1990s was a tough decade for American fragrances. Number one, Bath & Body Works had launched and from 1990 to 1997, they racked up sales of just under one billion dollars. Now, they took their business from many of those great brands of the '80s. Their sales went down at the same time. Do you remember the Gulf War?

It depressed worldwide sales of fragrance by almost 60%. By the 1990s, most of the great brands, the Armanis, the Opiums, all the rest of them were in the hands of multinationals. If you're a manager in a multinational, whether there's a Gulf War on or whether Bath & Body Works has depressed your sales, a budget is a budget. Get out and bring them up. So inevitably, they went into discounting. From 1995 discounting became endemic in the United States. First casualty, the great department stores. They couldn't afford to stock brands that had gone into the discount stores. I remember Nordstrom saying to me that people were buying Opium at discount stores, coming into Nordstrom and saying, can I have my money back, please? So they got kicked out.

The question was, what to replace them with? Well, that was where the niche brands from Paris came on in. Department stores were hesitant. Would they find an audience? Well, they brought them in, and to their surprise, there was an audience. Men and women who'd become interested in fragrance in the '70s, then in the '80s, fell in love with the impact and in the '90s were ready to change. That was how the American department stores actually gave niche fragrances a showcase. Then 2005, you had the explosion of social media. Suddenly we could talk to each other and that was how we saw the explosion of niche. And all because of an accident, it will never happen again in America. You've always got to go back to the bits and pieces that were taking place in the market at the time.

I was thinking about a parallel between Giorgio and Santal 33. That *New York Times* article about Santal 33 and the restaurants with signs of "No Giorgio"—these interesting examples of fragrance that managed to transcend fragrance into bigger pop-culture conversations.

I'll give you another one. American, French. I make the supposition that America was responsible for Chanel starting to note. You probably say, why? Well, as you know, Coco Chanel died in 1971, but before that, she was not a major force in America. Nobody knew she was a designer. Her perfumes were in drugstores. The department stores didn't really stop there. It was Norell, as I mentioned, in '68, that exploded into those department stores. The Wertheimers, who had negotiated the deal with Coco Chanel, he [Pierre] died, his son [Jacques] took over, but he was a pretty lousy manager. Chanel drifted worldwide until Alain Wertheimer took over. This was in the '70s now. He had seen the explosion of Norell in American department stores. He'd seen American department stores start to get really interested in fragrance.

It was he who pulled back Chanel in the states. Chanel was in over 25,000 doors. He pulled back distribution. It was he who, for example, started with the personality advertisements and started to really engineer Chanel for the luxury that it was. All because of America. So once again, you have this interaction between America and France. It's a fascinating subject.

Since you categorize fragrances based on the dry down, but a lot of fragrance sales are around that first impression, love upon first sniff, do you think that current fragrance retail models, whether they're online or in-store, are giving consumers enough space and information to properly evaluate fragrances?

No. They're all talking nonsense. I think Wikiparfum is a start. We provide the content in association with Puig. Wikiparfum itself is totally impartial. But as you know, we are together producing adaptations for retailers. For Boots in the United Kingdom, for Sephora and Nocibe in France, for Douglas in Germany, for Macy's and Ulta in the United States. Now, that's giving accurate information, because there's a team of perfumers, evaluators who have input in that. In that sense, retailers have the opportunity. But on the other hand, I look at some of this stuff, and their recommendations are weird. You like a chardonnay, let me offer you a shiraz. I'm fascinated by the opportunities that we're doing.

In the United Kingdom if you go on to The Perfume Shop, which is one of the clients that we love working with, the problem with fragrance finders is that nobody can find them. On any of these sites, there's so much that you get bewildered and confused and you get out of it. So we proposed to The Perfume Shop that we turn the entire site into a fragrance finder. If you go onto The Perfume Shop, just the regular site and you open it up, you see a whole page of different perfumes. Click one, it doesn't matter what it is, and you'll come

to the page and you'll see a big bottle. You'll see the sizes, the prices, the story, the pyramids. And underneath the bottle, you'll see a sign that says similar scents.

Now, if you click on that, we'll match the fragrance that you're looking at to three other fragrances that we think you might like, that the store stocks. We'll give you a rating, a best match, an 82% match, that kind of stuff. That has revolutionized it. We're picking up recommendations per month of millions. Now, that, for me, is the future where we really start providing people with decent recommendations. Next thing is we're working on processes where they tell us they tried the fragrance and they then rate it. In other words, it's a dialogue between us. That's the future we think is going to happen. And I'm fascinated by it.

How much do you think fragrance's past is informing its future?

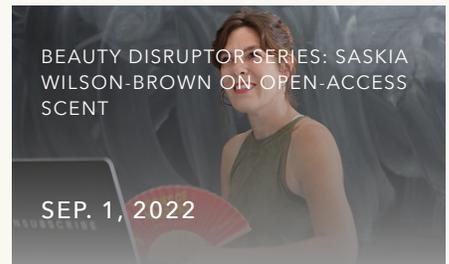
Well, if you don't know what happened before, how on earth do you have an idea what's going to happen in the future? The past is always for the future. Perfume evolves. People change, but emotion remains. I think it's going to be fascinating. You know, the beauty about niche is that they've put back luxury into the perfume business. When you think of it, in the '70s, we were raw. None of us knew anything about fragrance. Fragrance was something that occasionally you got to gift. In the '80s, oh, God, we loved all this, hit us around the head kind of thing. The '90s, we start to get interested. Then with social media, we're talking to each other. But the problem was that with the celebrities [scents], we got upset because they didn't smell too good and they didn't last very long.

We saw all this discounted stuff and we thought this was crap. But the funny thing is that the more we talked to each other about it, the more fascinated we became. I looked at an IFF study in which a researcher had looked at how people's attitudes to perfume had changed after Covid. I was intrigued. She found that people, women and men, to them, perfume was personal. It had become something that made them very happy. At the same time, they thought of perfume as being healthy. They weren't talking about sustainability or stuff like that. They were talking about it making them feel healthy. And the surprising thing, it made them feel holy. There was a spiritual quality that people are adding, and maybe that's why people are willing to pay more for perfume now than they would 20 years ago. Problem? We're seeing some of the niche brands knocking off customers. The fragrances that they're selling do not deserve the prices that they're charging. Not all, but a number. That is one reason why they'll become mass and so we're going to have dupes of dupes.

The concept of a trend in perfumery: is that still relevant?

I'm not a believer. I always remember Geoffrey Webster, who was president of Roure-Bertrand, a marvelous guy. He said, "A trend is simply a great new fragrance with a hundred other brands trying to follow it. Then another great success comes along and there's a new trend." I wish we could predict a trend. None of us make legends. You make them. Suddenly you find a fragrance, you love it, you talk to a friend about it, she or he talks to them about it there. And maybe a legend is created. Perfume, at the end of the day, is an art because it is emotional. So trends? Maybe for the dupes [laughs].

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