

UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL WITH MICHAEL EDWARDS



Anyone who hopes to grasp a true understanding of fragrance – let alone to succeed in the industry – is well advised to pay a very great deal of attention to the work of Mr. Michael Edwards. Ever-gracious and modest in the face of outstanding achievement, Edwards is, indisputably, one of the world's leading authorities on fragrance; the perfume expert's expert.

Working in collaboration with fragrance houses, suppliers, perfumers and evaluators, he produces the annual *Fragrances of the World* guidebook, now in its 26th edition. An all-encompassing classification system – impartial, independent and advertising-free – the guidebooks are acknowledged to be the most comprehensive references available for industry professionals, journalists and fragrance lovers who credit them as their most reliable and valuable of resources. Edwards is also the author of *Perfume Legends: French Feminine Fragrances*, a book that threw open wide the door to the secret and magical world of perfumers, their creations and inspirations; a teachable moment in the powers of research, preparation and gentle persuasion. (But more on that later.)

Somewhat elusive – given that he travels the world constantly, The Forum scrambled to catch up with Edwards in New York, a frequent home away from his other homes in Paris and Sydney. Here, we were afforded the welcome opportunity for a lengthy, candid and engaging conversation with the remarkable Mr. Edwards.

Known as the “fragrant gypsy,” living, as you do, in the four corners of the earth, where were you born, where did you grow up and where do you now feel most at home?

I was actually born in Malawi, in deepest Africa and sent to boarding school in England at the tender age of seven. I can't recall a time that I didn't travel, so for me, home is mostly wherever I am.

How did you get started in the fragrance industry?

Actually, biochemistry was my first choice of career, but I had the good fortune, in the mid-1960s, to be hired by a FMCG company, for their toiletries marketing department. It was an era of intense competition, when a new product's ingredients, including fragrance, were matched by competitors within months of launch. It was logical then that product managers would become intrigued by the power that fragrance has to change consumers' perceptions of a product's performance.

Did the discovery of that power lead you to think of fragrance as a career choice?

Intrigued as I was by the idea of that power, I knew nothing about perfume until 1975, when I attended a Firmenich fragrance workshop. I absorbed their *Bouquet de la Parfumerie*, a complex technical guide (out of print since 1978) that grouped fragrances, by their accords, into eleven olfactory families. The guide became my teacher; I would visit perfumeries and compare the different fragrances in each group. My nose opened to a new world!

How was it that you became the authority - the perfume experts' expert – you are now acknowledged to be?

My work developed quite by accident. In 1980, I was based in Paris, directing Halston and Orlane's international fragrance business. Then, as now, sales associates, around the world, pushed the perfumes they personally liked, or the new scents. The remainder slept on the shelves. Thinking that Firmenich's guide might help the sales consultants step back from their personal likes and dislikes, I asked the house if they might allow me to revive their out-of-print guide, and if they would help me to condense and update it. They agreed. It worked, and sleeping fragrances started to bark.

In 1983, I moved to Australia, to help integrate the Max Factor, Orlane and Halston companies. I'd been in Sydney for only three months when Norton Simon, the holding company in the States, was acquired by another conglomerate. Everything fell apart, so I turned my fascination with fragrances into a business and, over the next decade, trained some 32,000 people around Australasia.

Firmenich naturally would not permit me to continue to use their guide. I was forced to develop my own. My first guide, published in 1984, included only feminine fragrances and listed just 38 new ones. In 1988, Nordstrom got hold of a copy and asked me to add more American fragrances and, in 1991, the store asked me to add men's fragrances. It was then that I started checking my classifications with the brands,

which I could do because I had remained independent and impartial. To this day, I make no charge for listing fragrances and continue to decline both advertising and sponsorship. As a result, I am able to work with every brand and perfumer.

In 1998, Nordstrom asked me to add niche fragrances, and today, *Fragrances of the World* remains the only guide to keep track of the emerging niche fragrances.



With literally hundreds of fragrances launched each year, how do you manage to keep track of them for *Fragrances of the World*? Is every fragrance manufactured included in the book, and what standards must be met for a scent to be included?

The only way is to travel, and that is why I live between Paris, New York and Sydney, where my staff and studio are based. I meet twice each year with the olfactory development executives at each major group: P&G, L’Oreal, Estée Lauder, Coty, LVMH, and, at least once a year, with all other significant brands. I take advantages of shows such as the Cannes and Singapore TFWA exhibitions, Bologna’s Cosmoprof, or Milan’s Esxense where I am briefed on fragrances scheduled for launch during the twelve months. I then meet with the evaluators and often the perfumers at the oil suppliers to check and refine my classifications.

Before meeting with the perfumers, fragrances are evaluated on the blotter, and I try to smell as many as I can on my own skin, because there’s sometimes a marked difference between skin and blotter renditions. I compare notes with Erica More, my in-house evaluator, who evaluates every fragrance separately.

And as you add fragrances to the guidebooks, do you form a personal opinion about some or all, or can you remain totally impartial? And do you predict, with some accuracy, the life span of a fragrance and how well it will do in terms of sales?

Yes, of course, I form personal opinions. Some enchant me, others disappoint, but my personal opinion is of no consequence. My job is to get to know each fragrance as best I can, so that I can say, with a degree of confidence that ‘this goes with that.’ As to predicting success, every now and then one is struck with a sense that something of importance is about to occur. I had that feeling about *L’Eau d’Issey* and *Angel*. I was so certain that I wrote their stories in *Perfume Legends*.

Which perfumes and why, from your perspective, are the great, all time classics?

Five stand out in my mind: *Shalimar* (1925), is still the standard by which all Orientals are judged; *Chanel No 5* (1921) for its enduring magic; *Charlie* (1973), because it persuaded women to buy perfumes for themselves, and so changed forever the fragrance business; *Angel* (1992), whose gourmand notes have influenced so many fragrances since; and *cK One* (1994), whose youthquake appeal brought the young back to fragrances, and whose explosive success, and equally rapid drop, anticipated the sales pattern so common today.

What are your thoughts about the proliferation of fragrances created and marketed under “fashion” names such as Juicy Couture, Ann Taylor, Victoria’s Secret et al, and “celebrities” such as Britney Spears, Beyoncé, Sarah Jessica Parker and Tim McGraw?

They represent a natural evolution of the market and consumer tastes. It’s fashionable to put down celebrity fragrances, but I wonder whether the perfumers of the 1920s were not equally dismissive of the couturier fragrances of Coco Chanel and Jeanne Lanvin.

In your opinion, what are the key elements of a successful, commercial fragrance?

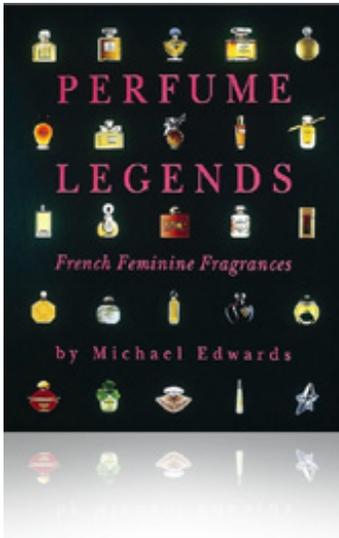
To my mind, the keys to a successful fragrance have not changed in a hundred years: it must be very soft and appealing to start; be very tenacious and lasting; and, above all, have a signature that makes others say, ‘what are you wearing? It’s lovely.’ In *Perfume Legends*, I quoted Maurice Roger, the maestro who engineered the revival of Parfums Christian Dior in the 1980s: ‘Perfume is substance and spirit. It must be a story, a myth, long before people wear it. If you don’t have noise and word-of-mouth, it doesn’t work, it has no meaning - it’s just business.’

And that was a comment that brought us to that most intriguing of questions: In *Perfume Legends*, you interviewed many of the industry’s top perfumers. How did you manage to persuade them to admit you to their secret world and then let you reveal all to the world at large?

To me, at its best, perfume is art, emotional art. Every now and then, a perfume gives one a pleasure so intense that its memory haunts one. Yet alone among the arts, there was no book in which the perfumers spoke of their work. *Perfume Legends* evolved as I researched it. To my surprise, the perfumers, designers and brands in France were willing to speak to me. The turning point came when the project intrigued Guy Robert, then president of the Société Française des Parfumeurs. His advice and knowledge proved invaluable. He and Edmond Roudnitska opened doors that would not otherwise have been open to me.

Why were people so co-operative? Perhaps because I was so clearly interested in their work. It’s not often that one has the chance to speak about one’s work to a writer who is fascinated by the story, with the certainty that one will have the chance to check the accuracy of the

text. Obviously, I had to prepare for each interview. Research is crucial. The interviews themselves were very relaxed. By consent, they were taped, and the full interview transcribed later. I became a word weaver. *Perfume Legends* works because it lets readers understand the evolution of French perfumers through the words and thoughts of the hundreds of men and women who spoke with me.



So, among perfumers, contemporary and/or of other times, whom do you admire – or is that a loaded question?

Guy Robert, as you know, has long been a mentor. I revere him and his work. Without the help that he and Edmond Roudnitska gave me, I could not have written *Perfume Legends*.

Do you believe that creating a perfume is like creating a piece of music, a sculpture or a painting?

It's all of these and more, because the result is unseen and the response emotional.

What do you see as the major fragrance trends of the next few years?

Despite what everyone says, I forecast no significant drop in the number of new fragrances, but I sense that the appeal of limited editions is dwindling. That said, fragrance collections will replace them as a promotional device. Above all, I anticipate that classics will continue to strengthen.

Industry studies – and numbers – indicate that the ranks of “lapsed fragrance users” are growing each year? Do you think there was one identifiable turning point in this downward spiral? If so, what was it, and what can be done to reverse the trend?

We've made fragrance so confusing that people often feel it's a risk, rather than a pleasure, to buy a new fragrance. We mislead people by describing the scent incorrectly. I noticed, the other day, a new chypre fragrance described as a floral oriental. It wasn't a floral oriental, any more than a chardonnay could be called a merlot. It doesn't really matter, I'm told, people won't know the difference. That's

nonsense to my mind. It does matter and today's consumers are savvy. The solution is simple, and I've spent the last twenty five years proving it.

Your fragrance database, *Fragrances of the World*.Info, now referred to as “the memory of the industry,” won you a Fragrance Foundation FiFi® Award. Would you tell us something about that?

The database debuted in 2005 and, like so much of my work, it was prompted by a retailer request. At their Champs Elysees launch, Sephora featured an organ of scents and raw materials for customers' entertainment; a marvelous concept but difficult to sustain. Liking the concept, Sephora US asked me to link the fragrances, in my online fragrance finder, to their head, heart and base notes. The project grew and selective, niche, masstige, mass market and direct retail fragrances, current and discontinued, were listed. Limited editions and flankers were added. Countries and years of launch were linked. Perfumers, oil suppliers, bottle designers and key notes followed, and today the database features information on nearly 10,000 fragrances. Its Fragrance Library is a mine of competitive information, but its Research Wizard, which sorts, cross-references and collates any combination of fragrances and facts, is the miracle tool. **Fragrances of the World**.Info has become the world's most comprehensive and useful fragrance resource.

On the subject of the Fragrance Foundation, what do you see as the international importance of the Foundation and what impact does it have on the fragrance industry?

I've often said that if the Foundation did not exist, the industry would have to invent it. No other industry body brings together the brands, the perfumers, the publishers and the retailers.

What is your favorite “scent memory”?

The clean, woody aroma of Carven's original VÉTIVER. To me, it is the scent of East Indian grass.

What is your favorite quotation about fragrance?

Fragrance is liquid emotion.

In your work, what inspires you?

The need to be better and to understand more.

It's hard to imagine, really, in what way Edwards could understand more or to be better at what he does. A lifetime of passion, integrity, pursuit of excellence and complete and total dedication to the task at hand makes Michael Edwards precisely what the world of fragrance knows him to be: the perfume expert's expert.