

## Jean-Claude Ellena and Michael Edwards ~ Deleted scenes from The Perfect Scent

By Chandler Burr, 19 January 2008

This is a deleted scene from Chandler Burr's book, *The Perfect Scent*. Chandler has written a brief paragraph explaining the context of the piece at the start.

"I sat in on a meeting at Hermès' Pantin headquarters in which Michael Edwards was interviewing Jean-Claude Ellena re several of Ellena's recent perfumes, which Edwards was classifying in his database. I was absolutely fascinated—I use Michael's database every professional day of my life—and I assumed the scene was a slam-dunk to make it into the book. But in George—who is not a perfume guy and whose job it was, as my editor, to make sure that the book would be readable by the general public—it set off an alarm bell. He found it "inside baseball," which of course was (as I pointed out) the whole point of *The Perfect Scent*. He agreed and at the same time was adamant ("There's inside baseball and then there's falling down the rabbit hole'."). Also it was neither truly *Jardin sur le Nil* nor *Lovely*. So it got cut. Honestly, I think it was a mistake, but we erred on my editor's side in this case."

Ellena left the rue du Faubourg headquarters and went back to the Pantin Parfums Hermès offices for a 2:30 p.m. meeting with Michael Edwards. Edwards was the perfume industry's "newspaper of record" as some New York perfumers called him. An Englishman who lives in Sydney and Paris, Edwards created and maintains the world's largest database (accessible only by subscription) of perfume information, [www.fragrancesoftheworld.info](http://www.fragrancesoftheworld.info), which classes, describes, and gives creator and other information of thousands of perfumes. He has come to interview Ellena. They meet in a conference room with a long oval table, florescent lights, and three-foot tall posters of past Hermès perfume ad campaigns.

Edwards spreads out his perfumes on the oval table as Ellena watches, chatting about this and that. Edwards is here to confirm the classification of two of Ellena's latest scents and the last ones he will make for anyone but Hermès: *Divine Bergamote*, for The Different Company, and *l'Eau d'Hiver* for Frédéric Malle. Edwards sprays *L'Eau d'Hiver* onto several touches and passes one to Ellena. The two men smell, concentrating.

Edwards: "For me it's like warm water, the third water that you've done for Frédéric. I get the same flour note in *Bois Farine*," which Ellena created for the profoundly well-done collection of *l'Artisan Parfumeur*. "I think I'm going to class *Eau des Merveilles* in the same group, but *Merveilles* has a citrus top note that goes to the heart whereas *l'Eau d'Hiver* merely has a citrus introduction. Now, we agree it's a light oriental?"

Ellena: "Yes."

Edwards: "But with a woody twist to it."

Ellena: "Yes, the wood."

Edwards: "Yes, absolutely. And I think it's got a crisper interpretation. Now, I've started my entry for Divine Bergamot for The Different Company, and I think it's neroli slash orange flower. You're comfortable if I put it in the same group as [Eau Sauvage](#)?"

Ellena: "Sure."

Edwards turns to Olivier Monteil, the handsome, pleasant, blond young man who heads PR for Parfums Hermès. Monteil has rapidly become Ellena's right hand. "Now, you haven't discontinued any perfumes this year?"

Monteil says no. He adds to Edwards that they are opening up distribution on [Un Jardin en Méditerranée](#), the first of Hermès' Jardin collection; it's going from an exclusive in Hermès boutiques to a general retail release in other stores. Edwards finds this interesting. In his view, the big news in the industry is flankers and limited editions (scents available for a season which then disappear), and Un Jardin en Méditerranée was conceived and launched as a limited edition. As happens in the industry, [Veronique] Gautier has changed that plan and decided that Méditerranée will become permanent and, with Nil, form an Hermès collection by itself.

Monteil has now been making sure the press knows that clients will be able to find it.

Ellena talks about a few technical points of construction with l'Eau d'Hiver.

Edwards: "What citrus are you using?"

Ellena: "Bergamot!" (Bergamot is a small, pear-shaped citrus fruit mostly grown in Italy. Its taste is sour and like a cross between lemon, orange, and grapefruit, and it is the key to the flavor of Earl Grey Tea.) Ellena says this with a "But of course!" flair and a grin, and then adds slyly, "But you don't smell it!"

Edwards (fascinated): "But how do you dampen it down?"

Ellena: "The flour note!"

Edwards: "Fascinating!"

Ellena: "And there's more citrus in l'Eau d'Hiver than there is in Eau des Merveilles." Smell the scents side by side, and this fact truly is amazing; Merveilles is an out-and-out genetic progeny of a classic citrus eau de cologne whereas Hiver is amorphous, unclassifiable, and reads without the slightest trace of citrus or classic fresh.

Edwards: "No! I haven't come across the idea of using bergamot to lighten! It's almost like whipping in egg whites." He looks at his notes. "Is there an iris note in Hiver?"

Ellena (coyly): "Oui..."

Edwards (nods): "You're using more and more iris these days. Is it becoming a signature for you?"

Ellena makes a serious face, stipulates judiciously, "Not reeeally. I'm more concerned about getting good sillage, and the iris is a critical part of that. I

don't like when it gets sticky. Hiver gave me two years of work to get this sweet lightness. If a perfumer puts this on the gas chromatograph he'll say, 'How the hell did he do that!'

Ellena notes that Edmond Roudnitska's brilliance in Eau Sauvage was to put in a huge amount of citrus and bergamot, then balance it with astonishing woods. He adds that Annick Goutal did a perfume called [Sables](#), which means sand, "but in fact it smells more like the maquis, the backcountry of Corsica."

Ellena (returning to L'Eau d'Hiver): "And I don't mean the top notes. It's about the whole structure. So there's a question of *équilibre*. After that there's another thing, time. We smell perfumes much better once we've come to know them; once your brain has learned a perfume, you recognize it both faster and with more force. That's easy to understand." He nodded at a poster-sized glossy of one of Hermès' perfume ads. "Take this girl in this ad for Eau des Merveilles. The first time you see her, you might pass her by. But the second time, you recognize her faster and more deeply. It's the same with—" (he searched for an olfactory example, found one) "[Eau d'Orange Verte](#). It's very light, and yet if you know it, someone can be almost across a room and you'll smell it on them, even when they can no longer smell it themselves."

Into l'Eau d'Hiver Ellena also put a gorgeous absolute of hay, which has the smell of the most glorious, golden, warm liquid sunlight. And (this with an elfin smile) he put honey into [L'Eau \[Parfumée au Thé Verte\] de Bulgari](#), though you can't smell it there, either. He tells Edwards with a smile, "Jacques Cavalier—" (heavyweight perfumeur, [Acqua di Giò Pour Homme](#), [Chic](#), [l'Eau d'Issey](#), [M7 Fresh](#)) "— was sitting next to me on an airplane and said, very nonchalantly, 'Mais t'es malade, toi, t'as foutu du miel dans L'Eau de Bulgari.' " You sly bastard, so you slipped honey into L'Eau de Bulgari.

Ellena grins. "J'ai dit 'Chapeau.'" I said, Congratulations.