



Scents of Place

A flower, a photograph, or a memory can inspire a perfumer. But the most visceral spark? A location. By Lindsay Van Gelder

It began with the violet color of the sky around the Eiffel Tower at dusk—l’heure bleue, when lovers rendezvous and Paris is at its most romantic. The color of the light then made perfumer Sophia Grojsman consider the smell of violets as an element in the fragrance that eventually became Yves Saint Laurent Paris.

Grojsman knew her violets. Growing up in Belarus, a “kid of two Holocaust survivors who never was exposed to anything that wasn’t small-town,” she remembers them as the only flowers that were accessible. “I never saw a rose until I was older—that was a much more expensive flower.” Nor did she see much female glamour in the hardscrabble postwar Soviet milieu. When she first traveled to Paris as a young woman, Grojsman was blown away by the sexy elegance of French women—“The hair, the clothes, the makeup!”—and as a perfumer, she wanted to incorporate that killer femininity into the brew.

The violet heart of Yves Saint Laurent Paris (launched in 1983) is uplifted by a sophisticated rose—and in that floral smackdown, Grojsman channeled the essence of every innocent abroad’s first giddy encounter with the City of Light.

Fragrance whacks the primitive, reptile part of our brains. A whiff of perfume or cologne can trigger instant associations with your mother, a lover, a time in your life...or a city or part of the world. Voilà! It’s the next best thing to a round-the-globe airline ticket.

There have been fragrances inspired by locations as far-flung as Fiji (Guy Laroche Fidgi), Tokyo (Guerlain), Timbuktu (L’Artisan Parfumeur), Russia (Chanel Cuir de Russie), African big-game country (Safari Ralph Lauren), Sicily (Dolce & Gabbana), Positano (Eau d’Italie), and the hills above Florence (Christopher Brosius’s A Room With A View, named after the E. M. Forster novel that’s set there).

Sometimes a perfumer will create a fragrance that’s close to the way a place actually strikes the nose. To capture the sensuality of Morocco, Mandy Aftel of Aftelier Perfumes homed in on *ras el hanout*, the cooking-spice rub whose aroma wafts over every souk. Her Parfum de Maroc uses natural oils derived from the ginger, cardamom, cinnamon, cloves, allspice, pimento berry, and nutmeg in the traditional recipe. The result is bottled casbah.

Tropical-theme fragrances have olfactory hits that put you right in the

hammock under the palm tree, such as coconut water and pink grapefruit in Jennifer Lopez’s Miami Glow, or watermelon in Lilly Pulitzer’s Palm Beach–inspired Beachy. Mediterranean notes such as cedar, cypress, fig, mint, orange, and citron can similarly plunk you down on the corniche overlooking the harbor in fragrances like Elizabeth Arden Mediterranean and Editions de Parfums Frédéric Malle’s Lys Méditerranée.

But not all places smell like orchards, gardens, spices, or oceans. The real Paris aroma is as much about baguettes, Citroën exhaust, and the curious orangey disinfectant they use in the Métro as it is about flowers. And ultimately, “good fragrances are made to become a part

research the Jardins fragrance series, drawing inspiration from Tunisian gardens, the banks of the Nile, and the smell of the air after a rainstorm in India. “The way I create our Jardins is not about capturing or reproducing faithfully the smell of a place, but rather capturing the creative idea of the place,” he explains. “I’m looking for the emotion, so certain fragrances will be highlighted—for instance, the fig tree in Un Jardin en Méditerranée, the green mango in Un Jardin sur le Nil, the ginger and water idea in Un Jardin Après la Mousson,” his fragrance based on a monsoon.

“You try to capture the place either literally, through the raw materials, or figuratively, to evoke the feeling,” says

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of somebody,” notes perfumer Frédéric Malle. Therefore they “can only include glimpses of an atmosphere in their composition, as their main task is to smell like a person, not like a place.”

So perfumers combine conventional fragrance ingredients with subtle geographical hints to create a mood—as with the black tea in Dior’s Escale à Pondichéry, or the red currant and pine needles in Paris-Moscou, Guerlain’s evocation of a train trip to Moscow.

Hermès’s in-house perfumer Jean-Claude Ellena travels the world to

Trudi Loren, vice president for fragrance development worldwide at Estée Lauder. Or both: For instance, she explains that Michael Kors’s Bermuda contains passion flower, cedarwood, and hibiscus, which are indigenous to the island, as well as synthetic ingredients such as musk that have nothing Bermudian about them but which, in the perfumer’s art, can evoke warm skin and “bring you to that moment in time when your toes are in the fine sand.” Kors’s Capri, on the other hand, honors a chic but rocky island that has very little natural

Around the World



(1) Editions de Parfums Frédéric Malle Lys Méditerranée Spicy, like a European summer evening. (2) Ralph Lauren Safari An exotic, floral scent. (3) Carolina Herrera 212 Named for Manhattan’s first area code. (4) Creed Virgin Island Water A unisex scent with hibiscus and ginger. (5) Dior Escale à Portofino Bergamot and bitter almond from the Italian seaside. (6) Michael Kors Very Hollywood Inspired by red-carpet-ready

actresses. (7) Bond No. 9 So New York Notes of cocoa and espresso for chocoholics and the coffee-obsessed. (8) L’Artisan Parfumeur Timbuktu Mango and papyrus wood evoke landscapes in Africa. (9) Guerlain Paris-Tokyo Jasmine and green tea capture this train trip from France to Japan. (10) Estée Lauder Beyond Paradise A floral scent based on rare English plants found in the Eden Projects gardens in England.

Toujours Paris

In every era, there's been at least one olfactory homage to Paris on the market—not surprising since, in addition to being beautiful, the City of Light is the headquarters of many perfume companies.



flora. So the perfumers used typically Italian notes like basil and cypress and blended them in unusual ways that were designed to telegraph sophistication.

Bond No. 9 has made a business of bottling the metaphorical essence of many neighborhoods in New York City. Little Italy is designed to smell like citrus gelato; New Haarlem [*sic*] has a bold, jazzy mix of bergamot, cedarwood, patchouli, and coffee. Brooklyn combines spicy and citrus notes that aren't usually blended. "We wanted the fragrance to reflect the young population and the ways it's contradictory," says company president Laurice Rahmé.

Even among adjacent streets in New

York, Rahmé adds, "each one has a different soul, spirit and attitude. Park Avenue, for example, has no buses and almost no stores. So we made an understated fragrance with tiny white flowers—very, very discreet. You move one block away to Madison, and there are stores and stores. This fragrance has to be bolder, a mixture of jasmine and gardenia that Park Avenue would never wear."

Other evocations can be as subtle as an area code (Carolina Herrera's New York-inspired 212). And sometimes fragrances are profoundly influenced by a specific locale, but you would never know it—the place becomes the backstory. Grojsman remembers visiting the second-floor apartment of an aunt in Israel, and "in the morning all of a sudden I felt this unbelievable smell" of grapefruit and

orange trees growing outside her window. It became the basis of a scent named not Jerusalem or Tel Aviv but Calyx for Prescriptives. Editions de Parfums Frédéric Malle's fragrance Bois d'Orange in the United States (known as French Lover in France) has a distillation of the smell of Paris's Café de Flore. Armani's Onde Extase is inspired by Japanese geishas but named after the French words for "wave" and "ecstasy." Go figure.

And there are magical locales that may never be chemically transliterated. "To create a perfume is an act of love, and my first love is Italy," said Ellena when asked what city or country he still dreams of capturing in a bottle. But the exact place in Italy that makes his nostrils quiver? That, he says, he is "going to keep a secret." ♦

Room Spray

We asked celebrities and fashion designers: Do you bring your own room scent when you travel?

FRANCISCO COSTA: "I bring cedarwood chips in my bag. I also use them at home."

ALEXIS BLEDEL: "Candles with the lid. In hotel rooms, they really help. I use one with lavender and ylang-ylang."

CHRISTIAN SIRIANO: "I'm all about my Yves Saint Laurent home spray. It's sweet. And it gets the must away."

KERI HILSON: "I travel with Jo Malone candles—Orange Blossom. Everywhere, and all over the room. One on the bedside, one in the bathroom."

KARA DIOGUARDI: "I have been known to burn incense or travel with candles. I really like vanilla, and I'm a big fan of Amber, a candle from Henri Bendel."

KELLY ROWLAND: "Diptyque Baies. I can't even say it. But it's beautiful."

ZAC POSEN: "I love a gardenia and/or peonies. Sometimes I will bring a candle with the scent of vetiver."

JOY BRYANT: "I try to travel with a candle. I like Serge Lutens."

GABRIELLE UNION: "When I work on a movie, I bring a candle to my trailer, because they usually reek."

RACHEL ZOE: "For my hotel room? Serge Lutens fragrances. And there are a bunch of oils I get in St. Barts every year."

EMMANUELLE CHRIQUI: "I bring different essential oils. I put them in the bath, on my pillow, to freshen up. It makes me feel in my space."

MISCHA BARTON: "I love Diptyque candles. John Galliano has one."

MARK BADGLEY: "Santa Maria Novella potpourri. James [Mischka] and I have it in our drawers at home. We've had disasters where batches of it burst open in our suitcase, and we couldn't get rid of that smell for months. It's very strong."

—JEFFREY SLONIM

At the Inn

Many hotels use fragrance to create a memorable environment. "Scent can enhance a guest's experience," says Offer Nissenbaum of the Peninsula Beverly Hills, which has Anthousa room scents such as grass and cucumber. Didier Picquot of La Mamounia in Marrakech commissioned a fragrance with dates and orange water—a good idea, according to Melissa Biggs Bradley of the travel website indagare.com. "Indigenous scents provide a connection to the region," she says. But winning smells aren't always native: The Ritz in Paris diffuses an amber accord by Maître Parfumeur et Gantier through the heating system. New York City's Cooper Square Hotel asked Red Flower for a candle with notes of resin, water, and steel. The name: Wanderlust. —LIANA SCHAFFNER