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The Beauty of Botanicals Made Liquid - The Passion of Natural Perfumers

by Anya McCoy, 20 February 2008

The 21st Century Revival and Redefinition of Natural Perfumery.

Like everyone who has progressed with passion, training and persistence to become a perfumer, the new wave of natural perfumers started with an intense love of scents. Many can trace their formative moment – the zing of recognition – when a scent transformed their life, and put them on the path of creation. They probably smelled everything around them (as did I) from grass to dirt, flowers, other people, cement, perfume, cereal, ink, paper, plastic dolls, toys, food cooking, hair, furniture, the air before a storm, rotten wood, burning leaves – in other words, the full spectrum of fragrance in the environment. The natural environment, complex, challenging, and often sweetly rewarding enticed and enchanted us. We were hooked.

Many who love perfumes in general, whether they contain all-natural ingredients or not, cite the kiss goodnight from a mother swathed in evening clothes, diffusing an exotic perfume as she bent over them before setting out to a party as a defining moment, a moment when perfume's magic of transformation of their mother into an otherworldly, fragrant unknown star in the sky touched them deeply. Perfume profoundly moves us, and natural essences move us the most – we are entranced with their beauty, complexity and “aliveness.”

When the synthetic chemical scents coumarin and vanillin were discovered in the 1880's, they were quickly added to the corporate perfumer's palette, and natural perfumery as it had existed up until then disappeared. Looking back in time perhaps four or five generations, it must be acknowledged everyone who loved perfume knew only perfume with synthetics blended in with the naturals.

Whether floral and discreet, or Oriental and animalic, loaded with civet, musk, castoreum and ambergris, the all-natural perfumes created in the pre-synthetics era disappeared.

The pre-1890 natural perfumer had a rather limited range of aromatics to choose from, as many of the Indian and Asian essences we now have easy access to were not used in western perfumery at that time. Today, champaca, lotus, ambrette, agarwood and many other exotics round out the number of botanicals available to the natural perfumer. That, along with the adoption of classic French techniques of blending using top, middle and base notes, helps differentiate the modern natural perfumer from the 19th Century one.

A look back to the 19th Century would be little more than an intellectual exercise for a

perfumer without the eternal beauty and complexity of the fragrant botanical extracts to kindle the fire of passion in the modern natural perfumer.

It has often been credited to Mandy Aftel of Aftelier Perfumes for the revival of interest in natural perfumery, due to the reception her 2001 book *Essence and Alchemy* afforded when read and subsequently adopted as a “Bible” of sorts by those who loved natural aromatics. There were books in the decade preceding *Essence and Alchemy*, most notably Chrissie Wildwood’s *Create Your Own Perfumes* and Mindy Green’s *Natural Perfume*, but it was Mandy’s book that caught on and fired up the imaginations and ambitions the masses. It is now published in 14 languages, and the worldwide distribution marks a massive number of men and women taking up of pipettes and scales and notebooks as they aspire to become natural perfumers.

Since aromatherapy had opened the doors of small-scale distribution of essential oils, all the natural perfumer had to do was nudge open a few more doors, and suppliers were providing them with concretes and absolutes, attars and other raw materials. The aromatic palette was complete, and the niche field of modern natural perfumery was launched.

Some of the beginner natural perfumers liked, and had, all sorts of perfumes in their possession, from the classics like Chanel No. 5 to modern niche Serge Lutens creations. Still others professed a dislike to the strong sillage and diffusion modern perfumes. There was no common ground on like or dislike of perfumes containing synthetic chemical – only a professed love of natural aromatics.

Yes, even though they had easy access to aromachemicals – synthetic versions of the naturals, and fantasy scents – they chose to work with only naturals.

Why have you decided to be a “naturals-only” perfumer is a question we often get. The person asking the question may list the negatives:

- Your raw materials are very expensive.
- Your perfumes don’t last as long as those with synthetics, and they don’t have great diffusivity or sillage.
- The raw materials are difficult to work with.
- You’re artisans, often working out of a spare room in their house, isolated.
- You have to for the most part, train yourselves and fund your own business.
- You have to search out distribution networks, or, more realistically, depend on the internet or local stores for sales.
- You realize they’ll never get rich at this, or have a corporate safety net.

We answer - Because.

Because:

- We’re in it for the art.

- We regard the natural essences as providing the richest, most beautiful, complex, challenging liquid artform to work with.
- The fragrances evolve on the skin in a way synthetics don't, and captivate us with their slow, seductive nuances.
- We don't like big-volume perfumes with a lot of sillage or diffusivity.
- We like subtle, complex aromatics that stay close to the wearer's body and evolve slowly on the skin.
- We take delight and pleasure in experiencing a unique natural aromatic.
- The discovery and unlocking of a complex accord within a natural is rewarding.
- The ability to connect on a level that speaks to an eternal fragrance is wonderful e.g., the cypriol we use is the same cypriol that was used in ancient Egypt.
- The excitement of being in on the ground floor of a new art as it develops, and realizing that if we've come this far in approximately five years, how far we can go with natural perfumery in the next fifty?

There is no competition with mainstream perfumery. We're just two different artforms, like oil painting is different from digital art. There are completely different aesthetics, mediums and results, and so it is and will always continue to be. These parallel arts will always have things in common, such as the need to respond to market trends, sourcing, R&D, and the need to always keep learning, keep on top of the perfumery and keep current, and that is our common ground.

Natural perfumers will always create for those who appreciate hand-made items from natural sources, and they are fortunate to live in the time of the internet and global transport that delivers raw aromatics and customers orders to their studio, allowing them to develop their art and business outside of the closed world of corporate perfumery schools.

We have a pronounced advantage in our pioneering of tincturing and infusing rare botanicals for our own use. Natural perfumers are as apt to create their own jasmine bases and tuberose tinctures as buy it from the supplier, if they have a garden to grow the botanical in. Others are tincturing seeds and soil to recreate some of the more exotic scents out of India, such as ambrette and mitti, which is soil attar.

And the clincher? Our mothers, who first turned us on to the world of perfume love our scents, and we now give back to them and their generation our liquid treasures, botanicals made liquid – naturally.

About the author

Anya McCoy will write a regular column on the perfumes, current trends, perfumers, raw materials and legislative and industry issues associated with the art of natural perfumery.

Anya McCoy is the founder and perfumer of Anya's Garden, the President of the Natural Perfumers Guild and runs the Natural Perfumery group at Yahoo. ■



About the author

Anya McCoy is President and Owner of the Natural Perfumers Guild, and artisan perfumer of Anya's Garden.

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