

Things to know about perfume

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Perfume (Latin "per fume" meaning "through smoke") was highly favored by the Egyptians, Romans, and Arabs. In East Asia, perfumes were incense based. People used to make perfumes from spices and herbs like bergamot, myrtle, coriander, conifer resin, and almond. The use of flowers came only after Avicenna, an Iranian doctor and chemist showed the process of distillation, whereby oils could be extracted from flowers. In 1370, at the behest of Queen Elizabeth of Hungary, the world's first modern perfume - "Hungary Water" was made by blending scented oils in alcohol solution.

The composition of a perfume is of vital significance and is handled by an expert known as a perfumer, who deals with primary scents like rose, jasmine, cola, etc; modifiers like esters; blenders like linalool and hydroxycitronellol; and fixatives like resins, wood scents, and amber bases. The resulting scent is explained in a musical metaphor of three "notes", namely, top notes (consisting of fast evaporating small size molecules) like citrus and ginger scents; middle notes (consisting of slow evaporating medium size molecules) like lavender and rose scents; and base notes (consisting of slowest evaporating largest size molecules) like fixatives etc. All these notes work together like a musical chord.

Perfume oils contain volatile compounds in high concentrations and thus have to be diluted by solvents, so that injury is not caused when applied directly on skin or clothes. The common solvent is pure ethanol or ethanol mixed with water. Fractionated coconut oil or wax, neutral smelling fats such as jojoba, can also act as solvents and dilute the perfume oil. The perfume oil is further mixed with other aromatic compounds. Generally, the percentage of aromatic compounds in perfume extract is 20% to 40%; in eau de parfum is 10% to 30%; in eau de toilette is 5% to 20%; and in eau de cologne is 2% to 5%.

The oil concentration in a perfume along with other aromatic compounds, determines the intensity, longevity, and price of the perfume and thus it is a closely guarded secret of every perfumer and perfume house. By adjusting the percentage level and the notes of the perfume, variations on the same brand may be created like Chanel's Pour Monsieur and Pour Monsieur Concentree.

Classification of perfumes is never complete, due to its ever-evolving nature. The traditional classification comprises of categories like Single Floral, Floral Bouquet, Ambery, Woody, Leather, Chypre, and Fougere; while the modern classification comprises of Bright Floral, Green, Oceanic/Ozone, Citrus/Fruity, and Gourmand. In 1983, Michael Edwards, a perfume consultant, created a new fragrance classification "The Fragrance Wheel", which classified and sub-grouped five standard families, namely Floral (Floral, Soft Floral, Floral Oriental), Oriental (Soft Oriental, Oriental, Woody Oriental), Woody (Wood, Mossy Woods, Dry Woods), Fougere (has fragrance elements from all the families), and Fresh (Citrus, Green, Water).

Perfumery has used a number of aromatic sources like plants, animals, and synthetic sources in the making of perfumes. Plants are used as a source of aroma compounds and essential oils. The parts of plants that are used are:

1. Bark (cinnamon, cascarilla);
2. Flowers (rose, jasmine, osmanthus, tuberose, mimosa, vanilla);
3. Blossoms (citrus, ylang-ylang, clove);
4. Fruits (apples, strawberries, cherries, litsea cubeba, juniper berry, vanilla, oranges, lemons, limes, grapefruit);
5. Leaves and Twigs (lavender, patchouli, citrus, violets, sage, rosemary, hay, tomato);
6. Resins (labdanum, myrrh, gum benzoin, Peru balsam, frankincense/olibanum, pine, fir, amber, copal);
7. Roots, Bulbs, and Rhizomes (vetiver roots, ginger and iris rhizomes);

8. Seeds (coriander, cocoa, mace, cardamom, anise, nutmeg, caraway, tonka bean);
9. Woods (agarwood, birch, rosewood, sandalwood, pine, birch, juniper, cedar).

Animal sources include Ambergris, Castoreum, Musk, Rom terpenes, Honeycomb, and Civet. Other natural sources include Lichens and Protists. Synthetic sources include synthetic odorants synthesized from petroleum distillates, pine resins, etc. Modern perfumes are mostly made from synthetic sources as they allow fragrances not found in nature, like Calone is a synthetic compound that imparts a marine metallic ozonous fragrance. Synthetic aromatics are more consistent than natural aromatics, and are hence, widely used nowadays in modern available perfumes.