



# Scents of Place

In the world of fragrance, cult niche perfumes chart exotic territory.

**Victoria Frolova** follows her nose

**S**ERGE LUTENS' PERFUME *Arabie* conjures the heady exuberance of a Moroccan souk with nutmeg, dates, and cumin; Neela Vermeire's *Mohur* takes you to India with its lush sweetness of roses and milky sandalwood; and *Amoureuse*, a perfume created by California-based *Parfums DelRae*, evokes San Francisco's jasmine-festooned streets.

If those names don't sound familiar, it's because these fragrances don't appear in TV commercials or on magazine scent strips. Niche perfumes are created by small houses and distributed on a limited scale, the most exclusive of which include only a precious few bottles. They are the cult favorites that gain their following by word of mouth.

The niche-perfumery movement in the 1970s had its origin in the desire to tell a personal story through aroma. In the same way that Impressionist painters broke from the Académie des Beaux-Arts to form

their own salon a century earlier, small fragrance houses like Diptyque, L'Artisan Parfumeur, Annick Goutal, and Maître Parfumeur et Gantier stepped away from mainstream perfumery to create their own styles. The fragrances they offered were remarkably different from the high-glamour, big-statement favorites of the era. Early compositions were simple, often based on a single note, and they

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sought to capture their creators' adventures: picking blackberries on a warm summer afternoon, trekking through Nepal, or frolicking on the beach in the south of France.

What started as a handful of renegade outfits in '70s Paris has grown into a universe of niche fragrances, from indie brands like Vero Profumo and *Parfums de Nicolai* to exclusively distributed luxury lines such as *By Kilian* and *Hermessence*. "They have evolved tremendously in the past 40 years," says expert nose and author Michael Edwards, who is careful to note that a niche label alone doesn't necessarily mean quality. "The best fragrances of this genre are designed by perfumers who have the creative freedom to pick their themes and use interesting raw materials." (Think cardamom or the very expensive orrisroot.) They are inspired by daring ideas, not trends, to create an experience that can be as exhilarating as a trip to a faraway land. "Niche perfumery is very appealing to today's consumer who seeks authenticity, luxurious ingredients, and real stories behind the fragrances they wear," says Kate Greene, the vice president of marketing at *Givaudan*, a company that manufactures fragrances as well as many of the raw materials used in fragrance blends.

A good place to begin a scent voyage is with *Annick Goutal*, a company named for its late founder, a former pianist who translated her extensive travels into scent. The lemony *Eau d'Hadrien* is the essence of the Tuscan countryside; you can almost feel the warmth of the Italian sun on your skin. With *Sables*, inspired by a visit to *Île de Ré*, an island off the west coast of France, you imagine the salty sea breeze

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**Beauty**

and bitter flowers dotting the sand dunes. For many fragrance lovers, the creations of Serge Lutens are another magic carpet ride. “Morocco gave me the taste of perfume,” says the French-born photographer and artist who now lives in Marrakech. His collection of scented vignettes smell of Moroccan orange groves (Fleur d’Oranger) and prized Atlas cedarwood (Féminité du Bois).

If not a sense of place, some perfumers attempt to bottle moments in time. Architect Carlos Huber, founder of the Arquiste Parfumeur line, collects antique manuscripts and researches traditional perfumery materials dating back several centuries in order to reflect an olfactive environment. For example, Anima Dulcis was inspired by the scents of a 17th-century convent in Mexico—dark chocolate, smoky incense, and hot chili—a sensory experience close to time travel.

Likening himself to a book editor, Frédéric Malle founded Editions de Parfums, a line that “publishes” scents. Exploring his collection is like flipping through a photo album: En Passant is a snapshot of Paris in the spring; Lys

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Méditerranée is a stroll through the Italian Riviera; and Le Parfum de Thérèse recalls summers in Nice redolent of jasmine and ripe melons.

During trips abroad, Hermès in-house perfumer Jean-Claude Ellena jots down ideas that later inspire the Hermessence collection. His Osmanthe Yunnan was born during a visit to China, while Brin de Réglisse bottles the caramelized sweetness of lavender in his native Provence. He explains that he relies on his imagination to evoke a scented flashback. “A picture of a flower—is it really the flower itself? Of course not! The way you look at it makes the difference,” he explains. And similarly, by crafting their individual stories, each perfumer invites you on a journey. It’s up to you to pick your destination. **mc**

**Nouveau Niche**

Here, cult fragrances from houses both small and large



1. **Arquiste** Anima Dulcis Eau de Parfum, \$165.
2. **Gucci** Guilty Black Pour Femme Eau de Toilette, \$56.
3. **Juicy Couture** Couture La La EDP, \$90.
4. **Frédéric Malle** Dries Van Noten Par Frédéric Malle EDP, \$265.
5. **Thierry Mugler** Alien Aqua Chic EDT, \$85.
6. **Escada** Cherry in the Air EDT, \$74.
7. **Kenzo** Amour I Love You EDT, \$56.
8. **Bottega Veneta** Eau Légère EDT, \$90.
9. **Jo Malone** London Osmanthe Blossom Cologne, \$110.
10. **Krigler** Schöne Linden 05 EDP, \$185.
11. **Guerlain** Eau de Lingere EDT, \$98.

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