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JANUARY 2012

## IMAGE: UNCOMMON SCENTS

# Whiff of Truth

Exploding the 10 biggest myths in the perfume world by DENISE HAMILTON



PHOTO: NOLA LOPEZ

Perfume might be the last billion-dollar industry to cloak itself in mystery, myth and magic successfully. Despite having the Internet at our scented fingertips, the average consumer today remains fuzzy on the history, ingredients, chemistry, global sustainability and regulatory issues that go into their favorite fragrance. So, with a firm belief that knowledge is power, Uncommon Scents plays Mythbusters to address, in no particular order, the 10 most prevalent misconceptions of the olfactory world...

**MYTH 1:** Designers and celebrities—think Calvin Klein, Perry Ellis, Ralph Lauren, Justin Bieber and Kim Kardashian—create their own perfumes.

**REALITY:** Fragrances are created by trained perfumers called “noses,” who work for giant firms like Givaudan and Firmenich. They are based on briefs provided by the client. They can be short: Give us the smell of water (Miyake’s L’Eau d’Issey) or make us the most gorgeous rose perfume ever (YSL Paris). Or they can ramble for paragraphs, describing odors, moods, places and even colors the scent should conjure. Occasionally, designers and a few stars (most famously, Sarah Jessica Parker) provide input, but mostly they just license their names. For more on this dirty little secret, Chandler Burr’s *Perfect Scent: A Year Inside the Perfume Industry in Paris and New York* is a must-read.

**MYTH 2:** If a perfume lists notes like cedar, sandalwood, patchouli, jasmine, lilac, carnation, vanilla and lily of the valley, that’s what’s in the bottle.

**REALITY:** Ad copy is meant to invoke your deepest desires and open your wallet. Over the past century and a half, chemists have learned to synthesize most natural odors—artificial vanilla, aka vanillin, has been in use since the late 1800s. Perfumes with lilac, violets and lily of the valley are almost always synthetic (sorry, Diorissimo fans!), as it’s almost impossible to extract enough fragrance from those flowers. And that “amber” note isn’t petrified tree sap, it’s a mélange of vanillin, woods and resins that often includes synthetics. But that doesn’t mean it’s not a great perfume.

**MYTH 3:** You can tell what a perfume smells like by sniffing the nozzle or spraying it on a strip.

**REALITY:** Perfume should be tested on skin and allowed to bloom up to 20 minutes. Perception of a scent is affected by emotion, body chemistry and past associations. That’s why a perfume that throws open the gates of your soul may elicit only a “meh” from your BFF.

**MYTH 4:** Buying at swap meets and online is a great way to save money.

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## Main Titles

Special extended episode,  
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**REALITY:** If the price seems too good to be true, it probably is. Chanel, Creeds and Diors are some of the most commonly faked perfumes, but I've smelled many (including a Louis Vuitton festooned with the distinctive LV colors and logo, and I *know* LV doesn't yet make perfume). The packaging ranges from shoddy to near perfect. At swap meets, always test first. If a scent is weak or disappears in 15 minutes, run. And buy the exact bottle you tested, not the cellophane-sealed box you're offered. Online, seek out legitimate discounters like Parfum1 and Strawberry.net. For eBay purchases, check for merchant complaints first on toolhaus.org, or you can always Google. T.J. Maxx, Ross, Marshalls and Nordstrom Rack stock authentic perfumes priced to move. One glorious day, I found an Armani Privé at Marshalls, which is usually \$150, marked down to \$19.95.

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**MYTH 5:** It's weird if a woman wears men's perfumes or a guy likes scents marketed to women.

**REALITY:** Perfume has no gender. A century ago, men doused themselves in lilac, rose and lavender. In the '30s, scents featuring tobacco and leather would be *le tout* with women. Wear what you like. If you're a guy who can rock Guerlain's Vol de Nuit or a gal (like me) who likes Chanel Pour Monsieur, go for it, and relax.

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**MYTH 6:** Perfume goes bad in a few years.

**REALITY:** If stored away from heat and direct light, fragrance—especially parfum, with its higher concentration of essential oils, musks and resins—can keep for decades. Some improve like fine wine. I've sniffed half-century-old bottles of Shalimar, Lanvin and Caron *extraits* so exquisite they're almost narcotic. Conversely, I've had newish fragrances go south after a year. Often, older perfumes lose their floral, citrus or aldehydic top notes and move right into heart notes. Others smell musty for 15 minutes before coyly revealing their glory. Perfumes can turn rancid or develop an acetone smell, especially if left in the sun. I once spritzed a vintage bottle of Le Galion Sortilège about 40 times on paper strips, hoping that once the bad juice was cleared out, it would smell okay. It didn't, but that was one out of hundreds. Be patient, spray on paper first and trust your nose.

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**MYTH 7:** Natural perfumes don't last long

**REALITY:** Naturals that use resins and spices such as storax, frankincense and benzoin can last just as long as any big-name department-store scent. Indolice, a stunningly raunchy jasmine fragrance by the talented folks at Providence, dries down intoxicatingly spicy and yummy and lasted a good six hours on me. However, natural perfumes generally don't have great sillage—the scent that lingers. And natural florals and citruses can often dissipate within several hours.

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**MYTH 8:** I wish I could wear perfume, but I'm allergic to it.

**REALITY:** You are not allergic to perfume, you are allergic to one of thousands of aroma-chemicals and/or natural ingredients. Try all-naturals such as those by Ayala Moriel or Mandy Aftel. Or depending on the severity of your allergies, try minuscule amounts of various perfumes until you isolate the culprit or find one that doesn't trigger them.

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**MYTH 9:** I don't wear perfume because it uses animal products, and I'm either vegan or object to animals being mistreated to obtain ingredients.

**REALITY:** A century ago, perfumers used animal-derived ingredients—musk, from the musk "pod" located near the anal glands of the Tibetan musk deer; castoreum, from beavers; civet, from wild civet cats; and ambergris, a stomach secretion of whales. Due to growing scarcity, animal-cruelty laws and the difficulty of sourcing natural supplies, they long ago switched to synthetics. (See Myth 2.) A very few niche perfumers claim to continue to use these ingredients, but even if you're paying exorbitant prices for one of these exotic fragrances, you're probably getting fleeced.

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**MYTH 10:** My favorite perfume, which I loved, doesn't smell the same, so either my tastes have changed or my memory's lousy.


**REALITY:** There's nothing wrong with your memory or your sniffer. Regardless of what anyone says, your favorite perfume smells different because it's been reformulated. Why? The company was likely sold to a conglomerate that switched to cheaper ingredients, the perfumer switched to synthetics after animal ingredients (see Myth 9) or Mysore sandalwood or oud grew scarce. Maybe the one you remember contained nitro-musks, a group of synthetics that were largely banned starting in the 1970s. Perhaps your favorite scent has been brought into compliance with International Fragrance Association (IFRA) regulations, which attempt to ban or restrict hundreds of once common perfumery materials now labeled allergens, such as oakmoss and citrus oils. For more, go to [nstoperfume.com](http://nstoperfume.com) and search for "favorite perfume doesn't smell like it used to."

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## COMMENTS

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I doubt that anyone really thinks that celebs create their own scents, but certainly a number of them chose the final version. SJP, for one.

And I wish you'd address the "remakes" of classic scents--most of which are disasters!

Posted by: [Bee Gomez](#) | [01/01/2012 at 09:51 AM](#)

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Thank you so much for your kind mention of my in this terrific article. You really covered so many important misconceptions in such an elegant and informative fashion. Beautiful!

Posted by: [Mandy Aftei](#) | [01/03/2012 at 10:57 AM](#)

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This is a wonderful read, Denise! There are so many pieces of misinformation floating around when it comes to scent. I try to spend at least a little time with each person who walks into my store simply introducing a few little facts about fragrance and, well, debunking. I also encourage anyone who walks in and isn't familiar with the lines I carry to take samples, wear them, take time to test and enjoy them before making a decision. In a world of "make the sale and make it quick" this seems to perplex some customers. However, as a consumer and reader/researcher of fragrance myself I want everyone to be as excited and interested with the subject as I am! We need more articles like this one... :-)

Posted by: [Erin M](#) | [01/03/2012 at 11:39 AM](#)

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