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IMAGE: UNCOMMON SCENTS Ciao Fraganza!

Italian perfumes are the stuff of legend, drawing their inspiration from myths, monasteries and Medici *by DENISE HAMILTON*



PHOTO: NOLA LOPEZ

When it comes to fragrance, it's France that usually basks in the limelight—however, Italy has a perfumery style all its own. Italian apothecaries have tintured herbs and distilled floral essences since the Middle Ages, and some *farmacias* claim to use recipes that date back 700 years. Today, Italian perfumes remain a big deal and well worth sniffing.

Unlike classic French perfumery, which favors the rich, heady and complex, Italians embrace a lighter, more airy aesthetic—la dolce vita of scent. Perhaps those hot Mediterranean summers lend themselves to cooling citrus and herbaceous blends. Certainly perfumers don't need to look far for inspiration in the coniferous marine air, orange groves, Mediterranean herbs and bracing apéritifs served on seaside terraces.

Living in Los Angeles, whose landscape and climate often approximate the Italian Riviera, I crave these lighter *eaus* each spring. The colognes of Santa Maria Novella—once made exclusively by Dominican monks—quench the heat for me, and I'm especially partial to Fieno (hay) and Caprifoglio (honeysuckle). SMN's L.A. shop is a great place to while away the hours sampling more than 70 scents. (Those planning an Italian sojourn can visit the 17th-century SMN flagship pharmacy in Florence.)

There's a pastel-and-gauze romance to Italian perfumes that makes them shimmer like the light in a J.M.W. Turner painting, with a translucent radiance rarely found in stately but heavier French perfumes. The apotheosis of this style is the Eau d'Italie line, launched in 2004 by luxury hotel Le Sirenuse on the magnificent Amalfi Coast. My favorites, by talented nose Bertrand Duchaufour: Baume du Doge (airy spices and incense named for the Venetian ruler); Paestum Rose (rose, pepper and incense), named after a Greco-Roman historic site; and Magnolia Romana, which summons a Mary Renault novel.

Myths of the ancient world provide their own inspiration. Consider Carthusia's Ligea la Sirena, made by a perfume house on the island of Capri and named after the mythical siren who tried to seduce Ulysses. Ligea's notes of opopanax, citrus, bergamot and vanilla are a lighter, gentler Shalimar.

My hat's off to Etro, an Italian textile firm that branched into perfumery in the late '80s and found a way to bottle world culture through such ethereal fragrances as Royal Pavillion, Shaal-Nur, Gomma and Messe de Minuit.

The niche firm I Profumi di Firenze is said to use the secret scent recipes of Catherine de' Medici, and I'm addicted to its light, spicy amber Ambra Grisea, the botanical musk Muschio Nero and the orange-blossom fiesta that is Zagara.

In sunny Tuscany, Farmacia SS. Annunziata is said to date to 1561, when it was housed in a Benedictine monastery. The Azzerlini family has owned the brand for three generations, making exquisite perfumes such as Fiore di Riso and Ambra Nera. From his Florentine laboratory, Lorenzo Villosi concocts the mouthwatering perfumes Teint du Neige (floral vanillic powder) and Piper Negrum, an ethereal blend of black pepper, anise, dill, cedar, mint and rosemary.

Moving on to industrial Milan, hub of the fashion world, we find 10 Corso Como, Carla Sozzani's chic boutique, with its eponymous perfume that blends sandalwood, incense, musk

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and coniferous notes. The red-capped bottle will evoke the Memphis design collective, if you're into that sort of thing.

Skip over to Venice, and you'll encounter a factory that has been making Pino Silvestre since 1955. The cute pinecone bottle holds an inexpensive but well-crafted cologne that blends bergamot, lavender, pine, musk, moss and sage. Travel down the Adriatic coast and a bit inland to Monte Colombo, where Frenchman and Sufi convert Dominique Dubrana whips up handmade natural scents as La Via del Profumo. Smoke, woods, incense and spices are his touchstones, and perfume critic Luca Turin is a fan. They can be had online at profumo.it.

In Parma, a city known more for opera and ham, Hilde Soli-ani has dreamed up Bell'Antonio (coffee and smoke) and Conaffetto (Jordan almonds wrapped in orange blossom). Laura Tonatto in Turin has a cult following for scent paintings like the the exotic Amir. Mona di Orio, a fashion-forward perfumer who trained with classicist Edmond Roudnitska, broke ground with her line Les Nombres d'Or.


Profumum began in post-WWII Rome as a storefront for handmade soaps and curios and expanded into sleek unisex fragrances such as the Mediterranean Acqua di Sale and Dulcis in Fundo, a Creamside essence reimaged by witty Italians. Then there is Nasomatto, which could be translated to "crazy nose" and is the brainchild of the gifted and eccentric Alessandro Gualtieri. His sexily transgressive scents include Narcotic Venus, Absinth, Hindu Grass and Black Afgano.

I admit I'm a sucker for fragrant tales of secret recipes, Medieval monasteries and Renaissance rulers. But even if they were concocted last week, there's something classic and timeless and yet sleek and modern that I love about Italian perfumery. Most of these niche scents are available at the standard online outlets or at L.A. boutiques Scent Bar and Duty Free Cosmetics. And if you do visit Italy, your nose will never go hungry.

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