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IMAGE

## Wanton Ways

Fragrances to follow in the footsteps of fiction's femme fatales

by DENISE HAMILTON



PHOTO: BRIAN LEATART

In *Double Indemnity*, we know Fred MacMurray is a goner the moment he gazes up that wrought-iron staircase and sees Barbara Stanwyck clad only in a suggestively draped towel. In the film adaptation of James M. Cain's classic noir novel, Stanwyck is a seductress with a femme-fatale scent to match. When MacMurray offers to return the next night to sell her husband life insurance, he asks, "You'll be here too?...Same chair, same perfume?"

We never learn the perfume's name, but I imagine it might very well have been Caron's *Narcisse Noir*, a narcotic blend of dark florals limned with civet, a dirty animalic note that evokes tangled sheets and illi-cit love—the perfect signature scent for a 1940s bombshell.

Raymond Chandler, a more fastidious writer, once said of Cain that "everything he touches smells like a billy goat." By that, he meant Cain's work oozed sex, but truth be told, many classic scents have more than a passing acquaintance with the billy goat: a dollop of darkness from civet, ambergris, musk and castoreum. While aromachemicals mostly replaced ingredients extracted from animals, the seduction continues apace.

So, what perfumes will best liberate your own inner femme fatale? Start with the classics: Ernest Daltroff's 1919 creation for Caron, *Tabac Blond*. Its dark florals, incense, tobacco and leather reflected a post-World War I exuberance as the frails finally got to drive, smoke and carouse as heartily as the guys.

Perfume has always played up the bad-girl angle. In 1924, *Madame Zed* (a good noir name) created Lanvin's abstract aldehydic floral *My Sin*. Eight years later came Jean Carles' convention-breaking *Tabu*, a strong Oriental with heady spices, amber and civet, said to be worn by Spanish prostitutes to mask the smells of their trade. (Apply today's drugstore version sparingly or face widespread wrath.) In 1937, Italian designer Elsa Schiaparelli gave us a dark, spiced narcissus with honey and civet named *Shocking* and, in 1942, the long-extinct *Spanking*, which I would give a leather bustier to sniff. Dashiell Hammett never says so, but I'll bet *Brigid O'Shaughnessy* in *The Maltese Falcon* wore *Shocking*, because she's *that* kind of dame.

Tempress perfumes often contain the biting green of galbanum, the smoky birch tar of leather, boozy notes, sweet or astringent tobacco, the peaty darkness of oakmoss and big tropical flowers, especially carnivorous lilies, jasmine and tuberose, with their rubbery, meaty, almost fecal notes. Or they can embrace the sweet and spicy Oriental motif of Guerlain's 1925 *Shalimar*, with vanilla, bergamot, spices and civet, which retains its boudoir allure almost a century later.

For a modern twist, try *Boudoir* by Miss Naughty Knickers—punk couturier Vivienne Westwood. It's a skanky, amber, vanillic rose that will have men inhaling your arm—or wherever you apply it. Seek out the original reddish juice rather than the current pink version.

Germaine Cellier, a pioneering 1940s female perfumer with noir proclivities, created some of the edgiest, most dissonant perfumes. You'll have to haunt eBay auctions to find her vintage *Vent Vert*, with its icy green galbanum blast, because today's version is a hollow shell. These days, the violet-leather-cumin dominatrix notes of *Jolie Madame* lounge on electronic street corners for under \$30.

Cellier, rumored to be a lesbian, posed for painter André Derain and counted Jean Cocteau among her friends. One infamous Cellier creation is the gorgeously butch *Bandit*, a smoky,

50 Johnnys  
A name that's rock 'n' roll gold



CAN YOU RECALL 'EM ALL?

boozy, decidedly unsweet concoction I imagine was a favorite of Brazilian architect Lota de Macedo Soares, tempestuous lover of poet Elizabeth Bishop. Bandit's femme counterpart, Fracas (both, by couturier Robert Piguet, remain widely available), is a giant, sinister tuberose that pairs well with red lipstick, crimson nails and chain mail.

Nothing screams femme fatale like tuberose. Serge Lutens' noir Tubéreuse Criminelle pairs the white flower with a genius menthol top note. Madonna's new Truth or Dare is an altar to tuberose, while Frédéric Malle's Carnal Flower, as well, oozes creamy naughtiness. Others conjure the tropics and *Our Man In Havana* betrayals: Manoumalia by Les Nez, Penhaligon Amaranthine, Guerlain Mahora and Givenchy Amarige.

Indolic jasmines like Jean Patou's Joy also get the blood pumping. Thierry Mugler's Alien, with its giant mutant jasmine and Seussian woods, is a 21st-century essay on femme noir and what I imagine beautiful replicant Pris would have worn in *Blade Runner*, the ultimate sci-fi noir movie. (By contrast, Deco beauty Rachael of the Tyrell Corporation would favor the retro glamour of En Avion, Caron's leather, neroli, anise and amber masterpiece.)

Raymond Chandler found the perfume world so enticing he set scenes in the fictional L.A. perfume company "Gillerlain"—clearly a hat tip to Guerlain—in *The Lady in the Lake*. But the inspiration went both ways, and perfumers have long mined noir's archetypes for inspiration. Before going to Hollywood's Egyptian Theater to attend the 14th Annual Festival of Film Noir this month, dab a little Espionage (peat, musk, vanilla, leather) or Film Noir (chocolate, patchouli, myrrhe) on your pulse points from all-natural perfumer Ayala Moriel.

Online niche perfumer Ava Luxe makes a different Film Noir (leather, black amber, rose, bergamot, tonka) as well as Madame X (coriander, acaciola, sandalwood, leather, incense).

Perfumes continued to riff on our dark proclivities as the 20th century waned. Yves Saint Laurent had a monster hit with 1977's Opium, and Dior hit the jackpot with tuberose-grape Poison, the olfactory 50-foot woman of the Reagan years. Haters will rejoice that both have been tamed by reformulation, though Dior evoked dysfunction anew with 2002's compulsively sniffable Addict.


In 2006, Tom Ford had a giant hit with the neon fruit, tropical florals, chocolate and musk perfume Black Orchid, which evoked the tabloid moniker of a brutally murdered starlet. More recently, niche perfumer By Kilian debuted the L'Oeuvre Noire line, including Liaisons Dangereuses and, my fave, the boozy, peaty Back to Black. Wear it while listening to the Amy Winehouse song and mourning her untimely demise.

Maybe the ultimate femme-fatale scent isn't a perfume after all. If you want to slay a man while winning his heart, try frying up a \$3 package of bacon. Do it often enough, and you might just stop him dead.

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Perfume is Poison  
<http://www.ewg.org/notsosexy>

A rose may be a rose. But that rose-like fragrance in your perfume may be something else entirely, concocted from any number of the fragrance industry's 3,100 stock chemical ingredients, the blend of which is almost always kept hidden from the consumer.

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One infamous  
Cellier creation is  
the gorgeously  
butch Bandit, a  
smoky, boozy,  
decidedly unsweet  
concoction I  
imagine was a  
favorite of  
Brazilian architect  
Lota de Macedo  
Soares,  
tempestuous lover  
of poet Elizabeth  
Bishop.