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NOVEMBER 2011

SEARCH

## IMAGE: UNCOMMON SCENTS

# Eau Naturel

**A cadre of perfumers are bucking the trend of synthetics in their creations** *by* DENISE HAMILTON



PHOTO: NOLA LOPEZ

The path to Roxana Villa's home in Woodland Hills is lined with white sage, rosemary, artemisia and lemon geranium. Near the porch, jasmine sambac blooms. Graceful California oak trees stretch their limbs, and beehives give honey, comb and beeswax. Inspiration is everywhere, as Villa works her alchemy in a home lab stocked with essential oils, absolutes, tinctures and infusions.

Villa is a natural perfumer, owner of [Illuminated Perfume](#) and one of a growing cadre who have renounced synthetics and sought a more organic path in the fragrant arts. It's still a sliver of a multibillion-dollar perfume industry that regularly pumps out bestselling scents for Kim Kardashian and Justin Bieber. But as complaints grow that chemically laden products trigger headaches and allergies, natural perfumes are increasingly offering a holistic alternative to those sickened by aromachemicals (read: synthetics). "Botanical perfumes contain vital plant essences," says Villa. "They aren't chemical cocktails."

For perfumers in ancient times, it was all natural all the time. They plied their trade with plant and flower ingredients, as well as resins and animal essences like ambergris, civet, castoreum and musk. But when chemists first synthesized vanillin in the late 1880s, it opened the floodgates. Guerlain's Jicky—arguably the oldest scent to be made continuously—blends lavender and vanillin. Chanel's iconic No. 5 couldn't exist without synthetic aldehydes that add sparkle to floral notes. One could argue that modern perfumery is dependent on synthetic molecules and all the more interesting for it.

But what was once a new frontier in additives now dominates the industry. Many big names today contain only a tiny percentage of naturals. This is not necessarily a bad thing—Marc Buxton, Bertrand Douchaufour, Olivia Giacobetti and Jean-Claude Ellena all rely on synthetics to create works of genius.

Using aromachemicals in scents helps protect endangered flora like Mysore sandalwood and Aquilaria trees. Synthetics spare animals, such as rare Tibetan musk deer and civet cats, from being killed or tortured to extract their potent oils. But as the cutting edge of modern perfumery embraces chemistry like never before, the naturalists seek a return to perfume's purist origins.

A pioneer of this movement, Mandy Aftel of [Aftelier Perfumes](#) in Berkeley struck a chord with 2001's *Essence and Alchemy*, an elegant manifesto that quickly became a bible of natural perfumery. Her compositions have been finalists for FiFi Fragrance Awards, and they still push the envelope of what can be done in nature—to wit, her new Haute Claire blends bitter green notes of galbanum with sweet ylang-ylang for an alchemically haunting composition. Tango, a perennial favorite of hardcore perfumistas, smolders with smoky, spicy, sweet, animalic leather.

In 2003, Aftel founded the Natural Perfumers Guild. After at first going defunct, the guild was revived in 2006 by Miami natural perfumer, organic gardener and ethno-botanist Anya McCoy of [Anya's Garden](#). McCoy's newest fragrance, Royal Lotus—whose rich florals are offset by citrus, sandalwood, tonka bean and ambergris—evokes South Florida's lush foliage.

Many of these artisans also create bespoke perfumes for private clients, lead workshops on natural perfumery and donate to conservation groups. But even within this rarefied world, there are distinctions.

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Perfumers debate the definition of “natural” scents. Can they contain alcohol or solvents? Are chemical molecules identical to natural ones allowed? In her fascinating Smelly-Blog, natural perfumer [Ayala Moriel](#) of Vancouver created a chart delineating the continuum.

Some perfumers work only with botanical essences, while others include animal products. Alexandra Balahoutis of [Strange Invisible Perfumes](#), whose essences are sometimes grown on family land in Ojai and hydrodistilled by a master distiller, is a purist using only organic, fair-trade, wildcrafted or biodynamic ingredients.

Balahoutis says online shopping now accounts for up to 30 percent of her sales. Indeed, the Internet has been a boon to naturalists, who often offer samples online so people can test-drive their fragrances. Consider Dominique Dubrana, the self-taught perfumer behind [La Via del Profumo](#). A French convert to Sufism, Dubrana lives in a village outside Rimini, Italy. Perfume critic Luca Turin launched Dubrana into the scent stratosphere when he raved about his “Mecca Balsam,” but the high quality of his creations keep him there.

Even the rock stars of traditional perfumery have taken up the challenge of naturals. French firm [Honoré des Prés](#) recently hired Olivia Giacobetti to create a natural organic line: Her Vamp à NY tuberose is a fresh green-white floral; Love Coco is delicate coconut milk and coriander leaf; and I Love Les Carottes is like biting into a spicy sweet baby carrot, only 10 times better.

The downside of naturals, especially florals, is they don’t generally last as long as scents with aromachemicals. Still, some plant essences and resins stick around on skin for hours, and some perfumers have no trouble straddling the divide.

[Liz Zorn](#) of Cincinnati uses synthetics in some of her compositions but launched her bestselling Modern Natural Absolutes in 2003. They include such gems as Meerschaum, with notes of tobacco, spice, cedar, wild chamomile, leathery amber, green moss and florals. [Dawn Spencer Hurwitz](#) of Boulder, Colorado, has an extensive line that includes the all-natural Gaia and three all-botanical scents (Ruba’iyat, a spiced oudh; Vanille Botanique, a rich, decadent vanilla; and the Hand of Buddah, an exotic, fruity floral citron).

Hurwitz and Villa came to perfumery from aromatherapy, and both are visual artists. Others are self-taught. The common link is a passion for creating artisanal perfumes in small batches and sourcing raw materials with the avidity of a boutique winemaker or high-end chef.

Says Strange Invisible Perfumes’ Balahoutis: “For me, it’s about wanting to honor the original art of perfumery that placed such an emphasis on botanical essences. I would never say people who use synthetics should pack it up and go home. There’s room for both.”

**DENISE HAMILTON** writes crime fiction and muses about perfume. Read chapter one of her new novel *Damage Control* at [denisehamilton.com](#).

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## COMMENTS

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Thanks so much Denise, it was a pleasure to meet you and share these aromatic treasures from the natural world with you.

My company is Roxana Illuminated Perfume which can be found online at <http://illuminatedperfume.com/> and <http://illuminatedperfume.etsy.com/>

Posted by: [Roxana](#) | 11/03/2011 at 03:04 PM

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Synthetics spare animals...from being killed or tortured to extract their potent oils. But as modern perfumery embraces chemistry like never before, the naturalists seek a return to perfume’s purist origins.

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Great article--I'm a huge fan of Roxana Villa!

Her botanical perfumes are available online at <http://www.etsy.com/shop/lluminatedPerfume>

Posted by: [Jessie](#) | [11/03/2011 at 04:54 PM](#)

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The link to the SmellyBlog article with the chart mentioned here is titled "What Is Natural":  
<http://ayalasmellyblog.blogspot.com/2011/08/what-is-natural.html>

Posted by: [Ayala](#) | [11/03/2011 at 08:24 PM](#)

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Dear Denise,

I am thrilled to be a part of this terrific article on natural perfume. Thank you so very much.  
Mandy Aftel

Posted by: [Mandy Aftel](#) | [11/03/2011 at 10:09 PM](#)

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I'd be happy to represent the Natural Perfumers from NYC ;)

Posted by: [Amanda Walker](#) | [11/04/2011 at 07:38 AM](#)

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Denise, this is an exceptionally perceptive article on the art of perfumery, both natural and mainstream. Thank you for the balanced view and thank you for including my perfermie.

Sincerely,  
Anya

Posted by: [Anya's Garden Perfumes](#) | [11/04/2011 at 01:34 PM](#)

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Very informative article and a pleasure to read.

Sincerely  
Wendy FR

Posted by: [Wendy](#) | [11/16/2011 at 11:33 AM](#)

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Excellent article!  
Great recognition and support of natural perfumery.

Posted by: [Raana](#) | [11/17/2011 at 10:15 PM](#)

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