

JUNE 2011

# Carnal Charms

Perfume choices go beyond sugar and spice and everything nice



NOLA LOPEZ

UNCOMMON SCENTS

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“According to sources in the fragrance industry hired to develop Lady Gaga’s first fragrance, the pop star has requested the scent ‘smell of blood and semen,’” reports Fashionista. Lady Gaga is known for cutting-edge style, but scents that evoke bodily fluids are old news.

Consider *Sécrétions Magnifiques*, a 2006 eau by Etat Libre d’Orange that features salty, metallic, medicinal, milky and decayed-white-florals-in-acoffin notes. Let’s call it the “money shot” accord.

When I asked Etienne de Swardt, the Baudelairean impresario behind Etat, how the idea for this perfume came about, he relayed the fragrance concept he gave perfumer Antoine Lie: “My brief was this pernicious idea of viral risk, which at times gives a mystical and transcendental dimension to sex. Suicide, love, confusion. When one does not know where to stand in between ‘Protect me from what I want’ and rushing for that raw desire, whatever the consequences...Welcome to your mammal’s DNA.”

That’s all well and good, but is *Sécrétions Magnifiques* wearable? I don’t think so, nor does reviewer Katie Puckrik, whose hilarious on-air sniffing of *Sécrétions* shouldn’t be missed. (Search it on YouTube.) But as an intellectual and marketing coup that set the perfume world abuzz five years ago, it’s brilliant.

“It’s number seven in our range and the fragrance most demanded for sampling on our Website,” de Swardt says.

Five years on, it remains to be seen how Gaga will push the scent envelope on bodily fluids. Or will she wimp out with yet another fruity floral (insert giant fake-eyelash roll) with hints of animalic naughtiness? Either way, de Swardt isn’t miffed at Gaga for appropriating his idea: “Eroticism is a land of plenty—I have no ownership on sperm, sweat and saliva.”

Indeed. Consider *Petite Mort*, a perfume of only 100 bottles brought out this spring by designer Marc Atlan. A French term for *orgasm*, *Petite Mort* has notes of warm skin, milk and urea. Created by famed niche nose Bertrand Duchofour, with help from Atlan and Kilian Hennessy (of the boutique firm By Kilian), *Mort* retails for \$1,000 for 10 milliliters.

As humans, we’re both repelled and aroused by strong odors, so I thought I’d take an olfactory stroll through the soiled-knickers school of perfumery. In the Middle East, Africa and parts of Asia, perfumery using strong spices and pungent odors goes back millennia. Through the first half of the 20th century, Western perfumery also embraced strong notes—civet, musk, tobacco and white florals whose indolic notes hinted of decay and even feces. These notes were akin to the pinch of salt that enhances the sweetness of baked goods.

There’s “skank” in Jean Patou’s *Joy* (indolic jasmine), *Bandit* by Robert Piguet (smoke, leather, civet), Caron’s *Narcisse Noir* and Guerlain’s *Jicky* (civet), Jean Desprez’s *Bal a Versailles* (dirty underpants), *Eau d’Hermès* by Edmond Roudnitska (sweaty B.O., cumin note) and *Femme* by Rochas (cumin, dried fruit, underpants).

Former *New York Times* perfume critic Chandler Burr has declared the midcentury classic *Miss Dior* almost “unwearable” by modern tastes. He and

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CAN YOU RECALL ‘EM ALL?

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others believe its animalic notes are too off-putting for consumers weaned on today's pale aquatics and fruity florals.

If so, the niche perfumers never got that memo. In 1998, Moroccan-influenced French perfumer Serge Lutens introduced Muscs Koublaï Khän, which smells like the armpit of a camel driver who's spent an oasis-less year on the Silk Road.

And pity the buyer of Frederic Malle's Une Fleur de Cassie expecting a floral. Nose Dominique Ropion, who gave us Carnal Flower and Amarige, has in Cassie evoked creamy, carnivorous flowers decaying in a musky, spicy, wet jungle.

Miller Harris's L'Air de Rien, Alexander McQueen's Kingdom and Vivienne Westwood's original Boudoir all have a soiled-panty note. Cumming by Alan Cumming (by the talented Christopher Brosius) is a coy double entendre that evokes soiled leather panties doused in single-malt scotch. Even Sarah Jessica Parker, whose Lovely and Covet were hits for Coty, is a fan of the skank school. She likes the smell of B.O. and has announced she's working on a perfume with self-same olfactory note.


But by 2012, when Gaga's fragrance comes out, the real avant-garde perfumers will have moved on to something new. Maybe something really shocking with violet or rose.

**DENISE HAMILTON** writes crime novels when not musing about perfume. Her book *Damage Control* comes out in September.

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