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Something in the Air

These days, real men wear fragrance—to the delight of their friends and lovers

UNCOMMON
SCENTS



NOLA LOPEZ

DENISE
HAMILTON

My first crush in high school wore Aramis, and all these years later, this leathery oakmoss-and-citrus fragrance by Bernard Chant can plunge me into the melancholy of adolescence. Back then, Jovan, Brut and Hai Karate ruled the San Fernando Valley, but boys weren't interested in the nuances of fragrance. For American men, scent was not a manly pursuit.

Oh, how times have changed. Today's guys have a wider array of fragrances to choose from than ever before, and with the word metrosexual ensconced in our vocabulary, it has become normal for men to embrace and explore scent with an enthusiasm once reserved for the ladies.

Almost half of today's men buy their own fragrances, which has nudged retail sales of male scents toward \$1.8 billion annually at a time when women's sales have fallen to \$4 billion.

A few interesting factoids: Celebrity and designer scents dominate both men's and women's markets, with Calvin Klein outselling all. Acqua di Gio is the top men's seller in high-end department stores, according to industry analyst John Deputato at Symphony IRI Group, and Stetson is most popular in mass-market outlets.

But recent years have also seen a proliferation of artisanal perfumers like By Killian, Parfum d'Empire, Ormonde Jayne and Parfumerie Générale. As a result, stores like Barneys New York, Saks Fifth Avenue, Neiman Marcus and Fred Segal have expanded into cutting-edge fragrances for men who don't want to smell like Cool Water clones.

Franco Wright is cofounder of Scent Bar in West Hollywood, a tiny space crammed with rare, imported and unusual scents for the discriminating nose. When he opened five years ago, his clientele was 10 percent male. Today, it's more than 30 percent—and their tastes are eclectic.

"We do very well with traditional 'English gentleman' colognes," Wright says, "but we've seen a lot of men gravitate toward incense, tobacco and oud. Rose is big, too, because you can make it dirty, woody and spicy."

His bestsellers for guys: Escentric Molecule 01, a radiant scent with touches of wood, incense and amber that smells shower clean; Andy Tauer's L'Air du Désert Marocain, with amber, smoke and frankincense; Avignon and Kyoto, from Comme des Garçons' incense line; and Endymion, a classic spice-and-wood Penhaligon's cologne that older customers favor and younger ones are discovering.

"We get stockbrokers, doctors, artists, musicians, movie executives," Wright says. "They're the customers who are into wine. They appreciate the craft. They're usually creative, and they're fascinated by scent."

Recently, I belied up to the Scent Bar to sample a flight of men's fragrances. First up were several from Francis Kurkdjian, one of the most talented noses in indie perfumery today. His Lumière Noire Homme has dark, rich notes of spicy orange and rose, while Absolue Pour le Soir is an intense blend of honeyed tobacco, boozy rose and leather.

Wright has had strong preorders for Penhaligon's Sartorial, a mix of lavender, wool and dust that calls to mind Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*. For the more edgy English gentleman, there is Czech & Speake, whose Cuba (think 1950s Havana nightclub), Dark Rose (dirty, boozy rose and oud) and No. 88 (bergamot, geranium, vetiver and sandalwood) are retro-modern classics.

50 Johnnys

A name that's rock 'n' roll gold



CAN YOU RECALL 'EM ALL?

The most transgressive men's fragrance I sniffed was Black Afgano by Nasomatto, said to include distilled hashish. Raspy and tarry, tempered with silky notes of oud, patchouli, cherry tobacco and leather, Black Afgano is produced in small batches. Scent Bar has a waiting list "20 miles long" for it, because the 180 bottles allocated for Wright this year were snapped up immediately.

Leather saddles, club chairs and handtooled cowboy boots are what I smell in the spicy amber leather of Mona di Orio's brand-new Les Nombres d'Or Cuir.

Hold that thought, and stroll outside where the pit barbecue is smoking, and you're detecting Andy Tauer's whimsical Lonestar Memories. If perfume were poetry, Tauer would be this generation's Auden.

Wait, now it's late, and we're under the stars. The aromatic logs have burned to embers, and we're in the world of Fireside Intense, Incense Pure and Winter Woods from Laurie Erickson's artisanal perfumery Sonoma Scent Studio up north.

Moving toward the ocean, Profumum's Acqua di Sale has a salty marine note I love to smell on a man. Think of sipping a glass of crisp Grüner Veltliner while sitting on a driftwood log at Big Sur's most remote beach, and you get the idea.

So, what's the manliest scent at Scent Bar? Tabacco, by the Italian firm Odori, which blends Paul Bunyan-size notes of hay, tobacco and honey. The genie in this bottle is the biggest, most muscular bearded lumberjack in the forest.

If your man skews more toward Johnny Rotten, there's always Sex Pistols, a new fragrance by the quirky État Libre d'Orange, which promises to bring out your inner punk but strikes this former Starwood habitué as more of a peppery citrus aquatic.

État Libre d'Orange may be French, but the postmodern punsters here are light-years from the gravitas of Guerlain and Coty. Consider their Fat Electrician, a peaty-vetiver scent whose artwork shows a pair of buttocks emerging from saggy trousers. Even if it stunk, I'd covet the bottle.

Many new boutique fragrances are unisex, which actually reflects historic views. In Victorian times, men's colognes wafted of lavender, rose and violet. Guerlain's Jicky, created in 1889, is a lavender-vanilla Fougère—quite the masculine genre—with herbs that work on both sexes.

L'Artisan's Timbuktu by Bertrand Duchaufour goes both ways as well but is popular with men for its sheer notes of sandalwood, incense, vetiver and wood. Another of my favorite crossovers is Chanel Sycomore, a smoky-incense vetiver in the company's Les Exclusifs line.

Plenty of department-store men's classics are still around and still smell fantastic: Dior Eau Sauvage, Guerlain Vetiver, Chanel's Pour Monsieur and Égoïste, Ralph Lauren Polo, Givenchy Gentleman—and, of course, Aramis and its brethren Aramis 900, Tuscany and Havana, all intoxicating with spice, smoke, rum, tobacco, vanilla and wood.

The men's classic that generates the most hysteria is Yves Saint Laurent's bestselling Kouros, whose white bottle evokes classical Greece. The notes outrage some, who liken it to locker-room sweat, urinal cake, semen, cat feces and dead rodents. My personal favorite, from an ambivalent Basenotes review: "This smells like Bigfoot's d-k; in a (very) good way!!!" Kouros fans, however, find it elegant, manly and classic. See for yourself—but easy on the trigger, pardner.

And what do male perfume critics wear? Luca Turin, the Jonathan Gold of the scents world, confessed in *Perfumes: The A-Z Guide* that for an entire decade he wore the fragrance New York, created by third-generation perfumer Patricia de Nicolai. (Her grandfather was Pierre Guerlain, and the firm is Parfums Nicolai.) New York's finely blended, crisp yet refined accord of orange, vanilla and wood might be a safe, elegant initial bet for the man wanting to dip his toe into this fragrant new world.

“With the word *metrosexual* ensconced in our vocabulary, it has become normal for men to embrace scent with an enthusiasm once reserved for the ladies.”

COMMENTS

 You can follow this conversation by subscribing to the [comment feed](#) for this post.

With Christmas approaching, this article couldnt be more timely in helping me find a gift for the man in my life. I am so glad to see this new perfume column in the LA Times. You couldnt have picked a better writer. Ms. Hamilton really knows her stuff.

Posted by: Kathryn | [12/05/2010 at 05:59 AM](#)

I feel very lucky because I had the pleasure of witnessing Ms. Hamilton in action at the Scent Bar.

Posted by: Emily | [12/06/2010 at 08:57 AM](#)

Simply, scents suck. If you have to wear that nasty stuff do it at home and not anywhere in public, including, the workplace, theaters, the bus, etc. Also, I know a wide variety of men from different socioeconomic levels and regions and not one would ever consider wearing a scent--sorry retailers.

Posted by: David Theiss | [12/09/2010 at 09:10 PM](#)

Im adore your articles.

Ive been obsessing with Black Afgano for a while, but havent decided whether to splurge on it for my selfish Christmas gift yet, or go for LAir du Desert Marocain.

David - you are missing out. :)

Posted by: Nick | [12/10/2010 at 03:35 PM](#)

Great article! In my opinion every man should have at least 3 or 4 bottles of good cologne for different seasons/occasions. My girl friend recently bought me a bottle of Encre Noire and it simply amazing and has gotten me more interested in colognes, now I am always on the look out for something interesting or unique. And for the guy who says no guy should wear a scent, thats just crazy. Who doesnt want to smell good? Every guy I know wears some sort of fragrance whether its a \$4 deodorant or a \$200 high end cologne, in the end its all about smelling good for yourself and others.

Posted by: Frank | [12/11/2010 at 12:47 PM](#)

As a man, I have a dozen niche fragrances. Im not "Metro" in the least, I just like to be clean and nice smelling. Colognes can really lift your spirits.

Posted by: Bill | [12/13/2010 at 11:30 AM](#)

good article but you missed the best hilde soliani profumo from parma

Posted by: gianluigi bonetti | [12/15/2010 at 09:40 AM](#)

Scent Bar is a treasure. It is totally worth the drive—even if you dont live in the neighborhood. I love it there. Impossible to find fragrances from around the world.

Posted by: Bradford | [12/16/2010 at 12:10 PM](#)

My absolute favorite perfume is by Lolita Lempicka, but I also buy handmades from Hové Perfumer on Royal in New Orleans--especially their marvelous Habanero, an edgy scent with cheeky tropical essences mixed with the smoke of a good Cuban cigar. To folks who say no one should enjoy perfumes in public, I say, hold your nose. Perfume is one of the deepest pleasures a body can have. Yes, even male bodies.

Posted by: Charles Dews | [12/25/2010 at 01:37 PM](#)

As a man, I have to say that most men smell horrible with scents and cologne. And so do the ladies. the Fact is that most people have such poor dietary habits and the toxins which ooze from the skin create a sickening stench when combining with most fragrances. Most people smell disgusting with their department store fragrances. Best to stick with soap and essential oils, IMO. Only the higher end fragrances smell good on people. for men, I suggest Cartier

Declaration. Its good to hear there are new designer scents for men, because the stuff that most men wear is disgusting. and remember, guys, a little dash is all you need!!

Posted by: Gabriel | [06/20/2011 at 08:12 PM](#)

Light scents are best for me. So many colognes for men now will sear the lining off your nasal passages. Penhaligons Endymion is nice, but I prefer their Blenheim Bouquet, which I wear occasionally. My "going out" cologne is Trafalgar, by Truefitt and Hill, another English cologne maker. I like retro scents. The old stuff was easier on the sinuses. Wore Eau Savage back in the seventies. A whiff of that really brings back my disco years. LOL

Posted by: Mike | [06/21/2011 at 09:09 AM](#)

This is very bad news for those of us who are allergic to fragrance.

Posted by: Ed | [06/23/2011 at 05:09 AM](#)

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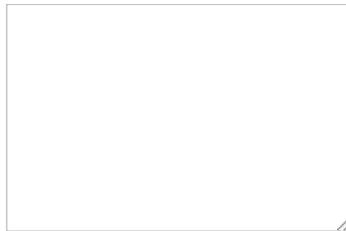
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