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NOVEMBER 2010

## Smells Like the Season

Sights and sounds of the holidays are great, but it's scent that cements the memory

UNCOMMON  
SCENTS

DENISE  
HAMILTON



Illustration by Nola Lopez

It is said that Southern California has no seasons, but we who live here have learned to recognize its subtle tonal shifts. When the sycamore trees flame crimson and giant breakers pound the empty beaches, my thoughts turn to fragrances that evoke both the melancholy of winter and the anticipation of joyous holidays.

CB I Hate Perfume's *Burning Leaves* is an olfactory hologram of long-ago autumns, when backyard incinerators transformed dead foliage into smoke. Christopher Brosius (CB), a self-taught perfumer, believes perfume is "too often an ethereal corset trapping everyone in the same unnatural shape." So he smashed the stays with scents like *Dirt* and *Snow*, which have been exhibited at Cooper Hewitt, National Design Museum.

As days grow chill and twilight comes early, I crave oriental fragrances laden with warm amber, spice and incense to chase away gloom and envelop me like a pashmina shawl. It's then I reach for Guerlain's *Shalimar parfum extrait*, Donna Karan's *Black Cashmere* and Hermès' *Ambre Narguilé*. These rich, sweet, smoky scents are perfect for candlelit dinners, cocktail parties and nights on the town. They also lend succor on flannel-pajama nights when I retire early with a good book.

Sometimes a brisk hike is just the tonic for SoCal's winter's chill, and I fantasize moving through primeval Old World forests instead of the scrub of our Verdugo Mountains. So I spritz on *Pino Silvestre*, the old-school Italian cologne in the pinecone-shape bottle, created by a Venetian family in 1955. *Pino* starts with bergamot, lemon and bigarade, moves into French lavender, thyme, clary sage, juniper and clove and settles into a base of tree moss, cedar, sandalwood and amber. My bottle cost less than \$15 online, a bargain at twice the price.

For deeper pockets, there is Creed's *Baie de Genièvre*, whose notes of juniper, cinnamon and vetiver remind me of sipping dry martinis at Musso & Frank Grill. Serge Lutens' *Fille en Aiguilles*—another favorite of mine—is a study in sweet pine needles, resin, frankincense and woods.

## 50 Johnnys

A name that's rock 'n' roll gold



CAN YOU RECALL 'EM ALL?

But as Tom Waits sings in “Just the Right Bullets,” on his album *The Black Rider*, “There is a light in the forest / There is a face in the tree”—and the path can lead to a candy-studded house that is not what it seems.

For my kids, decorating gingerbread houses (bless Trader Joe’s for those kits) is a cherished ritual. Me, I’ll spritz on some Five O’Clock au Gingembre from Moroccan-influenced French niche perfumer Serge Lutens and luxuriate in his vision of candied ginger, cinnamon, patchouli, honeyed fruit and mulled chai spices.

For a postmodern take on the winter forest, I reach for Ormonde Jayne Woman or Ormonde Jayne Man from the small eponymous London perfumery. These are sophisticated and ethereal, abstract interpretations of a cedar-pine woodland author William Gibson might have dreamed up.

For sandalwood-laced cedar, it’s Diptyque’s sheer Tam Dao. And NoCa!’s giant redwoods are the bottled genies in Sequoia by Comme des Garçons, which tempers a boozy red-rum note with pine, cedar and agarwood.

CdG designer Rei Kawakubo brings the same avant-garde Japanese aesthetic to perfume as she does to couture. Incense Avignon is a visceral evocation of midnight Mass in a 13th-century French cathedral: Think ancient cold stone, rustling silk vestments, a swinging censor on its chain and a booming organ. Slowly, the burning frankincense dries down to a balsamic vanilla.

Religious pageantry is also a touchstone in Etro’s Messe de Minuit. But where CdG is austere as a monk’s cell, Messe de Minuit is sweeter, blending incense with woody notes and clove-studded oranges.

For New Year’s Eve, there’s Evening Edged in Gold by San Francisco boutique perfumer Ineke Rühland. As a writer, I love the poetic names of Ineke’s perfumes. As a perfumista, I’m bewitched by the night-blooming notes of angel’s trumpet and phlox, with smooth lashings of leather, saffron and woods.

And what about the holiday feast? Serge Lutens’ rich and honeyed Arabie, with its medley of boozy dried fruit and spices, is fruitcake in a bottle—the best imaginable, like those whipped up at La Brea Bakery.

If the ever-silent hush of the season’s first snowfall holds appeal, there is Dawn Spencer Hurwitz’s Winter White, with its discrete hints of raspberry, almond, sandalwood, white-rose accord, heliotrope, musk and white chocolate.

More powder, you say? Teint de Neige by Lorenzo Villoresi is the Mount Everest of snow scents, with powdery vanilla, white flowers and musk. It’s enough to make Scrooge sing Bing Crosby’s “White Christmas.” And for après-ski, Guerlain’s Winter Delice conjures up sitting by a crackling fire at the lodge, sipping a hot toddy next to the Christmas tree.

On the winter solstice, I want to be in the Chatsworth cave where the setting sun’s rays illuminate the cavern filled with Chumash rock art. But since it’s off-limits to civilians, I’ll settle for dabbing on Midwinter’s Eve oil by Black Phoenix Alchemy Labs, the online purveyor of Renaissance-, gothic- and medieval- themed potions sold from the bricks-and-mortar Dark Delicacies in Burbank...only on nights of the full moon.


And what bottle shall I reach for on Christmas Eve? Caron’s Nuit de Noel, a rich, complex example of Old World perfumery. The story goes that Caron’s in-house perfumer Ernest Daltroff created Nuit de Noel in 1922 for love and muse Félicie Wanpouille, who cherished Christmas above all other holidays. Daltroff’s creation distills the pine’s green needles and resinous sap, midnight Mass incense, marzipan pigs, wassail spices, roasting goose and flowers. It’s a superbly blended composition of dried rose petals, jasmine, ylang-ylang, oriental spices, creamy sandalwood, incense, civet, vetiver and oak moss. I prefer the *extrait*, whose Art Deco bottle of jet-black glass is a work of art long after the perfume’s gone.

The feast of seasonal perfumes alone should be incentive for being good. And if you are, Santa will be sure to leave you a scented gift under the tree.

**Denise Hamilton** is a crime novelist and editor of *Los Angeles Noir*. Her upcoming book features a sleuth who’s a budding perfumista.

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“As days grow chill and twilight comes early, I crave oriental fragrances laden with warm amber, spice and incense to chase away gloom and envelop me like a pashmina shawl.”



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## COMMENTS

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*Thanks for another informative article. So many of the scents mentioned are familiar to me but others I will need to research.*

Posted by: [Wendy](#) | [11/06/2010 at 02:19 PM](#)

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*I love this descriptive and beautifully worded tale of fragrances! I own several of these and love to see that someone can capture their essence in a manner such as this!!*

WELL DONE

Posted by: [CHARDKAY](#) | [11/06/2010 at 03:16 PM](#)

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*This is quite a comprehensive perfume list! Thank you for your knowledge and interpretations of these perfumes. I want to try them all!*

Posted by: [Lynn Draddy](#) | [11/06/2010 at 03:17 PM](#)

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*This season is a feast not only for the heart and taste buds, but for the sense of smell and youve captured and expressed it beautifully!*

*I have to explore a couple you mentioned I havent tried yet, and move my Shalimar, 5 O'clock au Gingembre and Evening Edged in Gold to the front of the line. Id also suggest some of my favorites for this time of year, Annayakes beautifully sweet sandalwood, Tsukimi. Ginetets lusciously honeyed and boozy Botrytis is a perfect holiday fragrance and Id feel lost without either Coromandel or Iris Ganache to snuggle before a warm fire. ~sigh~ I love this time of year :)*

Posted by: [Kat](#) | [11/06/2010 at 04:30 PM](#)

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*What a breath of fresh air it is to read about perfume from someone who clearly has a passion for it, rather than the typical beauty editor fluff.*

*Lovely suggestions and a lovely read.*

Posted by: [drp](#) | [11/06/2010 at 05:40 PM](#)

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*I love this small but exquisitely described catalogue of favorite fall and winter scents! Keep the evocative articles coming.*

Posted by: [Susan](#) | [11/07/2010 at 12:59 AM](#)

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*Thank you for this beautifully evocative piece! Youve mentioned several of my favorites. I hope to read more from you on this topic in the months ahead.*

Posted by: [Mary Stephens Mitchell](#) | [11/07/2010 at 03:31 AM](#)

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*Thank you for another wonderful article Denise! Im looking forward to the next one.*

Posted by: [Agnes](#) | [11/07/2010 at 05:10 AM](#)

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*Fascinating. Many thanks for the fragrance column. I will make sure to read Ms. Hamiltons new book.*

Posted by: [K.R.](#) | [11/07/2010 at 01:28 PM](#)

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*I love perfumes, I love this article. The Los Angeles area did not seem like an evocative place for perfumes, but your writing has changed that.*

*Thank you very much for your beautiful prose.*

Posted by: [Adriana](#) | [11/07/2010 at 01:40 PM](#)

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*If I weren't already a Perfumista, I might want to become one after reading about the myriad scents available to us in this lovely article. Thanks for adding Perfume to the Cultural Roster in LA!*

Posted by: [Qwendy](#) | [11/07/2010 at 02:30 PM](#)

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*A thumbs up for your fabulous article on perfumes, you had my imagination wafting between images of pine forests and marzipan munchkins. I too am enamored by scents.*  
Roger Gordon

Posted by: [Roger Gordon](#) | [11/07/2010 at 07:06 PM](#)

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*What a wonderful reminder that scents are as much a part of our experience of the holiday season as tastes, sights, and sounds. And how refreshing to read an article about perfume that isn't merely plugging the latest offerings from a magazine's advertisers. I hope that we will be seeing more of Ms. Hamilton's exquisite writing about perfume in the Sunday magazine in the months to come!*

Posted by: [Kaja](#) | [11/08/2010 at 10:33 PM](#)

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*This is a beautiful article! Please keep them coming, Denise, as I and many others love reading about perfume.*

Posted by: [violetnoir](#) | [11/09/2010 at 10:32 AM](#)

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*Beautifully written and inspiring for those, like me, who love fragrance and associate it with everything in my life. Thank you.*

Posted by: [Rebecca Anderson](#) | [11/10/2010 at 08:43 AM](#)

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*A pleasure to read fragrant words, to feel aromatic memories. Thank you*

Posted by: [Esperança Cases](#) | [04/20/2012 at 06:16 AM](#)

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