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SEPTEMBER 2010

SEARCH

Embracing Chaos

The path to perfume obsession is marked by scent, not sensibility

UNCOMMON
SCENTS



Photo: Advertising Archives/greedy with anticipation.

DENISE
HAMILTON

The scene is set: In only the flickering light of my monitor, I pass through electronic portals to meet others like me. I bring a vial to my nose, and immediately I'm transported to a dazzling olfactory world.

I am a secret perfumista.

It's not something I tell people. It's not even something I wholly understand—this obsession that has taken root and, ahem, *flowered*. After all, my hands are full balancing motherhood and writing mystery novels. I don't splurge on designer purses, shoes or makeup. Nor do I have enough disposable income to indulge my hobby to the hilt.

Yet here I sit, surrounded by bottles and samples, bidding on obscure vintages like En Avion by Caron or Jean Patou's Moment Suprême; swapping niche fragrances with like-minded perfume nuts from Singapore to Latvia; researching ambergris and castoreum; and dropping words like *animalic*, *sillage* and *indolic* into everyday conversation (For the curious, "animalic" refers to bodily and animal smells, "sillage" is the scent trail we leave behind and "indolic" describes a molecule in both human feces and white flowers such as jasmine. Jean Patou's perfume classic Joy is quite indolic, for example.)

How did I get here? The answer, like the denouement of a novel, reaches back into childhood and foreshadows a trigger event years later.

My mother was French and White Russian, you see, and some of my earliest and most precious memories are of spritzing on her Madame Rochas, Chanel No. 5, Rive Gauche, Je Reviens and Bellodgia while striking poses in the mirror.

Scent was my portal into a vanished world of European glamour, where women in draping gowns waltzed through the night with tuxedo-clad men. This was clearly where I belonged, but some tragic twist of fate had instead plunked me in the San Fernando Valley.

Fragrance was an important accessory throughout high school and college: Fendi, Halston, Anaïs Anaïs, Estée Lauder Private Collection, Chanel Cristalle, Tatiana and Calvin Klein's Obsession. But my Road to Damascus moment came much later—and not in some Paris boutique while on a whirlwind book tour.

I saw the light at a thrift store. I haunt them the way ghosts haunt graveyards. And one day, amid the jumble of cheap jewelry and sunglasses, a Donna Karan perfume box caught my eye. It was called Chaos. The tapered bottle evoked a sliver of ice. I spritzed; the clerk wrinkled her nose and muttered, "Too strong."

My first thought was of church incense: smoky, sweet, musky, strong and spicy. *Too exotic*, I thought. Plus, \$29.95 was pretty steep for a thrift store. But the scent lingered, changing with time into a subtle waft of cinnamon, cardamom, musk and lavender. Chaos was complex, piquant, challenging. It conjured Asian bazaars, aromatic oils, harems, Arabian genies in lamps.

On impulse, I went home and Googled Chaos, which led me to the motherlode of perfume sites —[basenotes.net](#). Apparently, Chaos was "discontinued and highly sought after," going for up

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50
Titans of Design
Southern California's
trailblazers of creativity



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to \$400 on eBay. (DK has since rereleased it, but the cognoscenti still pine for the original.)

Being shallow and superficial, I suddenly liked it a lot more. And when I raced back to buy it, it was with the thought of selling it on eBay.

Instead, each morning I sprayed my pulse points and placed it thoughtfully back on my bureau. I'd never owned such an expensive scent. It made me feel decadent, spoiled, rich as a duchess. But its musky, animalic quality also vaguely unsettled me.

Looking up the notes, I saw that Chaos contained sandalwood, cardamom, cinnamon, padukwood, agarwood, saffron, clove, amber, musk, sage, lavender, chamomile and coriander. I began to think about my motivation: Did I merely want to swan about wearing a fragrance that cost about as much as a new computer? Or was it something deeper?


I began to experiment with perfumes I'd dismissed before as too spicy, heavy and rich. This led me to Shalimar, Amouage and the Montale Aouds, which introduced me to artisanal perfumers Serge Lutens, Andy Tauer and Annick Goutal and the joys of swapping fragrances on makeupalley.com. And this, ultimately, helped me rediscover and appreciate anew the classic French perfume houses of my youth.

Was I tempted to sell the Chaos? No. The money wouldn't change my life, but the sheer sensual pleasure and intellectual journey it sparked has. For me, it's far more than perfume. It has become a symbol—a glass edifice to the extremely personal nature of smell and the brain's role in telling us what we like and what we don't—and why.


Chaos was my golden chariot ride into the strange and obsessive world of the perfumista...my trip down the rabbit hole. I haven't looked back.

DENISE HAMILTON, a crime novelist and closet sniffarella, pleaded the Fifth when asked to reveal the size of her perfume collection.

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COMMENTS

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A kindred spirit! Thank you for this terrific article, I too haunt basenotes and makeupalley seeking not only new leads for possible swoon worthy frags, but to be able to 'speak' with souls who 'know' what this wonderful madness is all about. May we never know anosmia!

Posted by: Kathy | [09/05/2010 at 08:31 AM](#)

I LOVED this article!!! Ms Hamilton speaks the absolute truth when she talks about the secret world of a perfumista-- from the hidden stash in the closet to pleading the Fifth about collection size. I eagerly await more articles like this and am keeping my fingers crossed that the "powers that be" might consider a regular column on the topic. Wouldn't that be fun?

Posted by: Alfie Cronin | [09/06/2010 at 12:59 PM](#)

A fellow perfumista and Noir fiction lover. Nothing brings literature more alive than remembering a scent from the past! Wonderful article! Thoroughly enjoyed it and eased my guilt at collecting perfume!

Posted by: Deborah Hofreiter | [09/06/2010 at 01:20 PM](#)

Thank you for opening the door to this wonderful world of sniffing. So many memories, so many adventures. Perfume has such power as well as pleasure.

I want to hear more stories!

Posted by: Hillhevd@earthlink.net | [09/07/2010 at 05:53 PM](#)

vanished world of
European
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There's plenty of us out there....thank God for the internet. I haunt the blogs more than MAU and BN, but it's all good.

Great article, thanks so much!

Posted by: Rhonni | [09/08/2010 at 07:49 AM](#)

Your wonderful article was linked on the perfume blog, Now Smell This so I imagine you'll soon be meeting many of your fellow perfume friends. You have so beautifully expressed the darkest secrets of our collective hearts.

Posted by: Rappleyea | [09/08/2010 at 08:09 AM](#)

Nice reading Denise, keep up the good work!

Love Ya,
Aunt Pat

Posted by: Patricia Hamilton | [09/08/2010 at 09:05 AM](#)

This is really terrific, and in so many ways exactly explains how I, a male perfumista, feel about the wonderful and mind-expanding world of scent. Thank you.

Posted by: JSA | [09/08/2010 at 10:30 AM](#)

Memories of awakening to the fragrance of southern sausage frying on the stove in the morning, the perfume she wore for my first real kiss, of Remington Smokeless Powder wafting from a .357 magnum intermingle. I too enjoy a LA Noir novel. Thanks for the introduction Deb.

Posted by: D Henderson | [09/08/2010 at 11:04 AM](#)

Oh, yes! (Crime writer here - we met at BP.) Wish I'd known. I'm twitching with impatience to receive a set from the Italian master perfumer I read about in the NYT magazine. Q: is the new Chaos a different formula?

Posted by: Susan C Shea | [09/08/2010 at 11:24 AM](#)

don't forget the site for friendly perfumistas, newbies most welcome: fragrantica.com A year ago I owned a couple of dozen bottles and considered myself decadent. Today I, too, plead the 5th when asked the size of my collection. Be forewarned: once a nose starts sniffing there's no going back!

Posted by: Lauren | [09/08/2010 at 04:03 PM](#)

I loved this article—I used it to prove to my husband that I'm not totally insane! I hope to see more from this same author in the future.

Posted by: Nina Zolotow | [09/09/2010 at 09:45 AM](#)

What a wonderful article! and welcome to the rabbit hole (we have cookies on tuesdays!) A perfume collection is a wonderful, soul transporting thing....but I only show my collection to a favored few as well. Most of the uninitiated just don't get it. I frequently get compliments from friends and colleagues....they ask what the scent is...they comment that I always seem to be wearing something different...I just chuckle and say "well, I have a few bottles and I like to switch off" ...they have no idea..... ;-)

Thank you for this article, I hope to read more from you.

Posted by: Daisy | [09/09/2010 at 10:51 AM](#)

OMG!! We're out of the closet. Actually, most of my scents are "in" the closet. Don't remember what sparked my interest, maybe my Dad's pharmacy with all those apothecary jars,,or different organic reagents in my chemistry background. What a great article!! Hope this is a regular thing. I don't feel so alone:)

Posted by: Lynne | [09/09/2010 at 01:03 PM](#)

Wonderful article. Ms. Hamilton captures the semi-hidden life of her fellow perfumistas perfectly.

Posted by: Melissa | [09/09/2010 at 02:05 PM](#)

Just sniffed Chaos today and it was a nice, gingery incense. Thanks goodness for perfume blogs, as all my friends in my town believe in only buying one perfume, if that, and wearing it forever...

Posted by: AnnieA | [09/09/2010 at 06:45 PM](#)

Glad to know I am not alone! MUA and Basenotes have been a great place to explore and meet others who share our passion for 'fumes!

Posted by: Amy Bethel | [09/09/2010 at 07:33 PM](#)

I enjoyed the article even though I do not feel the same way: I wear my obsession proudly in public.

Posted by: JK | [09/09/2010 at 11:52 PM](#)

Thank you for the wonderful article! Being a regular member of the on-line perfumista tribe, I know I'm not alone, but you've described what it means so elegantly that I feel a little less embarrassed about my obsession.

Posted by: [Danielle Howe](#) | [09/10/2010 at 08:35 AM](#)

Lovely article! I tumbled down the rabbit hole a few years ago (thanks, internet) and know what good company is to be found therein, as well as all the amazing scents and some truly wonderful writing. I've had some really joyful moments, too, discovering amongst my friends and colleagues other perfumistas, and perfumistas-in-the-making, and sharing our stories as well as collections. If no one told me, I would never have guessed there's so much to explore in the world of perfume or that it could be so enriching to my life -- and I'll bet there's more than one person who will read this article and find themselves sniffing with more excitement and interest than they have before!

Posted by: tsetse | [09/10/2010 at 12:39 PM](#)

I find this article incredibly intriguing as I've watched my own adult daughter be drawn deeper and deeper into the world of scent; especially that of Solstice Scents (an Etsy-based seller that has a huge, tremendous following of rabid fans).

Once a person becomes intrigued with scent, there is a real awakening...a true change in the overall character of the person. I'm witnessing it unfolding.

Thank you for this amazing article and I can't wait to share it with my daughter.

Posted by: Grace | [09/10/2010 at 01:13 PM](#)

Susan, in answer to your question, yes the newly reissued Chaos is a different formula from the original. It is a little toned down to my nose, and more fruity.

Posted by: [denise.hamilton](#) | [09/12/2010 at 11:22 AM](#)

Great piece of writing! I hope to see more here. In particular, I enjoyed your remark about the "sensual pleasure and intellectual journey." I believe both qualities are what have attracted so many of us: it is like wine collecting or fine aged bourbons or whatever. The obsession is not all about sensual pleasure but satisfies one's intellectual curiosity too.

Thankfully, we can open a bottle, unlike a wine bottle, keep using it months, probably years, later, and also share with friends and strangers!

Posted by: Laura | [09/12/2010 at 12:47 PM](#)

I have an unopened bottle of JOY by Jean Patou from the 50's or 60's.. 1/4 oz. Anyone know how much it's worth?

Goody

Posted by: Marsha | [09/15/2010 at 10:33 AM](#)

Denise, your writing is brilliant!

Posted by: Jana Menard | [04/14/2011 at 12:34 PM](#)

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