



**Purist perfumers are now rising to the challenge of creating truly sophisticated scents with all-natural ingredients, says Karen Wheeler. Image by David Newton.**

I'm in Barneys beauty hall in New York on a quest: to find fragrances made entirely from natural ingredients. If I'm going to find them anywhere, it's here, for the back-wall perfume counter is home to the niche, the cultish and the kind of scents admired by fragrance buffs. Hidden among the bottles of Fracas, little-known artisanal brands and colognes made by Carthusian monks, I find just two lines (Red Flower and Strange Invisible Perfumes) made from all-natural ingredients.

It's striking that, at a time when demand for "natural" and organic skincare ranges is soaring, natural perfumery – blended exclusively from pure plant essences, natural oils, resins, "absolutes" and "concretes" – has remained a quiet beauty backwater. Perfumes made from entirely natural ingredients are viewed by many industry insiders as the poor relation of the fine fragrance world. The term "natural perfumery" hints at unsophisticated, aromatherapy-based blends or single-note

oils – such as patchouli or lotus flower – loved by those of a hippie disposition but lacking the all-important luxe factor.

As the esteemed perfume critic Luca Turin points out in *Perfumes, The Guide* (Profile Books, £20), synthetic ingredients have artistic benefits when used in fragrance and their introduction over a century ago changed the art of perfumery completely. (Chanel No 5 is the oft-quoted example of what synthetics can bring to the party, since it is the addition of aldehydes that adds sparkle to the natural jasmine and rose.) "Synthetics are the bones of fragrance, naturals the flesh," he says, borrowing the words of perfumer René Lalou. While acknowledging that modern perfumes have moved too far towards the synthetic ingredients – "all grinding dusty bones and no juicy meat" – Turin concludes that "nobody save a few hippies wants invertebrate fragrances".

Some, notably the new wave of purist perfumers working solely with natural

# GOING EAU NATURELLE

ingredients, would beg to differ. “Our blends are very complex, containing anything from 30 to 70 essential oils from around the world, including rose from Turkey and vanilla from Tahiti,” says Natalie Szapowalo of natural and organic perfumery brand Tsi-La, which she founded with her sister-in-law, the model Annie Morton. Made from 100 per cent pure plant essences, the 50ml eau de parfums launching next year include Kesu, a warm blend of amber and rare woods, and Fleur Sauvage, a floral containing rose and jasmine (both about £65). “They might be green and organic but they are still luxury products,” says Szapowalo. “They come in very pretty bottles and there is nothing granola or hippie-like about them.”

Although Turin’s views are shared by many perfumers, some of us have always preferred perfumes based on natural oils and the sort of dense, sticky scents that come in small glass bottles – as natural fragrances nearly always do – over semi-synthetic mainstream sprays. There is something very appealing about Red Flower’s Organic Perfume Oils (about £24, 10ml) and Concentrates (about £93, 15ml), named Guaiac, Champa and Ambrette after their exotic ingredients (although each scent is in fact a blend of several natural, organic essences). Far from being “spineless”, such blends often have a strong character, appealing to those of a boho sensibility. (Many Tsi-La clients are drawn from the worlds of fashion and design.) While not exactly a tsunami, the trend for natural perfumes is developing into a strong undertow.

“It’s definitely a trend,” says Pamela Roberts, creative director of L’Artisan Parfumeur, whose L’Eau de Jatamansi (£80, 250ml eau de toilette), launched last year, is not only made from all-natural ingredients but Ecocert-certified as 74 per cent organic. It was created as a spin-off from the brand’s organic bodycare range, which was itself the result of customer demand. “It was also ingredient-led,” says Roberts. “Himalayan nard or jatamansi is naturally organic and wild and has a lot of character. It has a woody, green and herbaceous scent and you can almost imagine the landscape of the Himalayas when you smell it.”

Roberts admits that the process of creating an organic, all-natural fragrance was “challenging”. In addition to the various controls required by Ecocert, “the difficulty was to create a bio [organic] perfume that didn’t smell bio,” she says. L’Artisan Parfumeur worked with Karine Vinchon, a young perfumer at Robertet, a Grasse-based fragrance house known for its expertise in the realm of natural ingredients, to create L’Eau de Jatamansi, which also contains bergamot, sage, guaiac wood and Turkish rose. It’s a very appealing, lively and clean-smelling, lemony fragrance that Roberts describes as “skilfully blended – a real perfume”. L’Artisan Parfumeur is now working on a second all-natural fragrance.

That natural perfumery has moved to a more sophisticated level is also demonstrated by the Jo Wood Organics range. “My mission



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was to prove that organic does not mean unglamorous, and to make it completely decadent and sophisticated – right down to the the luxe brown packaging,” says Wood, the former model and wife of Rolling Stone Ronnie Wood. The range contains two natural, organic fragrances, both inspired by her love of Africa: Amka (Swahili for “wake”) and Usiku (“night”) organic eaux de toilette (£36, 50ml). The latter, with rosemary and pine-needle top notes underscored by patchouli and cedarwood (97.3 per cent of the ingredients are organic), is a warm, refined fragrance with a bit of a rock-chick edge to it and one of my favourite launches in recent years.

But it’s the US, specifically California, that appears to be the most fertile ground for natural, artisanal perfumers. “The US is 10 steps ahead as far as natural perfumery is concerned,” says Georgie Wolfenden, cofounder of beauty and wellbeing e-retailer glowgetter.co.uk, which stocks Tsi-La. “They are really into the pure and natural organic beauty thing.” One of the pioneers of modern natural perfumery is Californian Mandy Aftel. “Discovering the art of natural perfumery is like crossing the threshold of a beautiful old house and finding it utterly intact and splendidly furnished – but deserted, as if it had been suddenly abandoned,” Aftel has said, alluding to the fact that the use of natural essences has all but disappeared in commercial perfumery over the past few decades. Beloved of some, but unbearable to others, Aftel’s fragrances have a very strong character and are sometimes described as “dark”. Her Aftelier range consists of unusual blends (about £75 for 1/4oz or about 7.4ml perfume) such as Cepes and

Tuberose, Cognac, and Pink Lotus, which was originally created for Madonna.

Also at the avant-garde end of natural perfumery is Alexandra Balahoutis, the founder of Strange Invisible Perfumes (about £97 for 1/4oz parfum) – “botanical fragrances” which strictly exclude synthetic and commercial grade ingredients. “I’m not saying that perfumes containing synthetics are bad. It’s just that it is much more exciting and challenging to work with raw materials,” she says. “The chemistry is so elusive and difficult to pin down with lots of tricky nuances that are so much fun to discover. And there is a connection between the final product and its origin.”

Like perfumers of past eras, Balahoutis even distils some of her own essences – notably vanilla, saffron and frankincense – from family-owned farms, using a process called hydro-distillation, a less aggressive method of extracting natural ingredients than conventional means. “My aim is to reintroduce the concept of really refined perfume, the style that came to a standstill when synthetics took hold,” says Balahoutis. Influential perfume blog Now Smell This describes one of her fragrances, Heroine, as smelling “like a mixture of melting plastic and gasoline,” so it might be too refined for many noses. “It is very particular,” Balahoutis admits. “But there are other fragrances in the range such as Prima Ballerina – a lovely, crisp rose formulation – which have more universal appeal. A lot of people who think they hate fragrance actually love our perfumes.”

Do people really care if a fragrance is natural or organic? According to Nicola Tompkins, buying manager for perfumery at Selfridges, “It is less about the fact that a perfume is natural or organic and more that the whole package is something quite

special.” Over the past couple of years, she points out, “There has been a swing towards small niche, artisanal brands with integrity, good quality natural ingredients and a name perfumer behind them.” Nicky Kinnaird, whose Space NK has just purged its bodycare line of many synthetic additives, suggests, “One reason why the natural fragrance market is not anywhere near as developed as skincare is that perfume is not used in abundance all over the body like, say, a body lotion.”

Much of the interest in natural perfumery seems to be driven by a desire for authenticity. To put it bluntly, perfumes containing a high concentration of natural essences smell better; while the idea of a perfumer playing around with precious phials of expensive natural oils is much more alluring than huge aroma-chemical conglomerates churning out their eaux on an industrial scale. A single stoppered drop of Homage Attar (£175) by Omani perfume house Amouage – which claims Kate Moss and George Clooney among its celebrity fans – demonstrates the art of natural perfumery at its most luxe. It is made from entirely natural ingredients associated with Arabian perfumery, including frankincense and Rose Taifi, of exceptional quality and concentration, to the extent that it takes an entire field of rose petals to produce just one tiny bottle.

Meanwhile, across the fragrance industry there are signs of a renewed emphasis on natural essences and their provenance. Christian Dior has (quite rightly) made much of the fact that its new limited edition fragrance, Escale a Portofino (£40, 75ml) contains a high concentration of natural ingredients (over 50 per cent, as opposed to the four-to-eight per cent usual for a designer brand). It contains 16 Mediterranean essences, including Sicilian lemon and bergamot from Calabria which, according to Dior’s perfumer François Demachy “are of the highest quality standard”. It shows. Smell this sunny cologne and you can see those luscious lemons being picked from the tree that morning.

Perhaps this is the real trend. While natural perfumery is likely to remain niche and on Barneys back-wall fragrance counter, we’re likely to see a bigger emphasis on the quality (and quantity) of natural essences used in perfumery in general. As Balahoutis says, “There’s now a gourmand sensibility to fragrance. People appreciate good ingredients and pick out different notes in the same way they would a fantastic wine or a really good chocolate. A product is only as good as the ingredients that go into it.” Naturally. ♦

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**Top: Red Flower’s all-natural organic perfumes, from £24. Above left: Jo Wood Organics Usiku eau de toilette, £36.**