

Image courtesy of Cartier

Something's IN THE AIR

While we once coveted big-impact, big-name scents, there's now a growing demand for little-known yet luxurious, fragrances.

ANGELINA VILLA-CLARKE finds out more

While there'll always be a place for a spritz of Chanel No. 5 or a burst of the sensual scent that is Guerlain's Shalimar, the way we want to smell is changing. Many of us are seeking out more unusual brands in the quest to smell unique and in a decidedly top-end market, many perfume lovers are willing to pay eye-popping prices for scents containing exotic, hard-to-source ingredients.

The proof? Consider that in October 2014, cosmetics conglomerate Estée Lauder Companies acquired the niche fragrance emporium Le Labo in a deal slated to be worth around \$60m. Soon after, it added Editions de Parfums Frédéric Malle to its stable, which already includes some of the most well-known beauty brands in the world and its eponymous scents as well as the colognes of Tom Ford.

Coincidentally, the purchasing of Editions de Parfums Frédéric Malle was finalised in the same month that Harrods unveiled a 5,000 sq ft Salon de Parfums to showcase an edited selection of the world's rarest scents in the grand surroundings of a 'fragrance gallery', complete with twinkling chandeliers and impressive architectural columns (harrods.com).

Here, you can secure a limited edition bottle of Emerald Stars from the niche Italian brand Xerjoff (£350 for 50ml) or, indeed, invest in the world's most expensive perfume. The special edition version of Clive Christian's No 1 fragrance, which was first launched 15 years ago, comes in a 24-carat gold and diamond encrusted crystal bottle and is filled with 30ml of the scent, costing an eye-watering £143,000.

Alexia Inge, co-founder of Cult Beauty (cultbeauty.co.uk), which seeks out lesser-known beauty brands from across the world, agrees that we are shunning generic perfumes.

"No-one wants to smell like everyone else anymore," she says. "A good perfume is like a fine wine – it always starts with old fashioned artistry and skill and takes at least 12 months to formulate. By comparison, most 'celebrity' perfumes are put together in two days. When you wear a niche fragrance people chase you down the street to find out what it is. It's that elusive quality that we are all after."

Her tips for unique scents include Molecule 01 by British brand Escentric Molecules (£65 for 100ml). "Its pheromonic effect smells different on everyone and yet is intensely alluring. You will never get as many compliments about your scent as when you're wearing this," she says.

"Black Jade by Lubin Paris (£65 for 50ml) is another must-try. It's based on an ancient composition called Jardin Secret, which was made especially for Marie Antoinette by royal perfumer Jean-Louis Fargeon, to whom Lubin was apprenticed. It has smoky notes yet is very feminine. It's basically a rose floral, with attitude."

Renowned for his alternative take on scent is perfumer Francis Kurkdjian (franciskurkdjian.com) a man who is best known as the 'nose' behind Jean Paul Gaultier's Le Male, one of the world's bestselling perfumes, not to mention another 40 fragrances he created for major perfume companies. Inspired by the origins of perfume,

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he launched his own luxury fragrance house, Maison Francis Kurkdjian, in Paris in 2009. Customers can visit his fragrance atelier for a bespoke service but as well as perfumes for women and men, his olfactory creations include impregnated papers and perfumed bubbles to scent the home. He has also been called upon to create 'perfume installations', including decadently scenting the fountains at the Palace of Versailles.

"Creating a scent is a way to express myself and create unique emotions," he says. "People look for something new to wear that will make them noticeable and garner comments when they are wearing it. A fragrance is a story. You need a beginning and an end."

With a cult following already well established, Byredo, a Stockholm-based perfume house, is also gaining momentum in the perfume world, not least because of its enigmatic founder Ben Gorham. Having had no formal training as a 'nose', his unusual creations – such as Gypsy Water and Bal D'Afrique – explore the connection between scent and memory, and are meant to take the wearer on a personal journey (byredo.com).

"As a perfumer, having a unique voice is vital," he ▶





► says. “A great fragrance should have something to say, and transport the wearer to another place. Byredo is about the vision – we seek to take the wearer on a journey and to surprise them along the way. It’s nice to use a rare or little-known ingredient to add the element of surprise. In my Flowerhead scent I used lingonberry, for instance, which achieved this perfectly because it is typically used in Sweden for jam”.

“Fragrances have become ‘bigger’ in the last few years,” he continues. “Customers are more confident and much happier to make a statement with their scent. The celebration of the individual is another influence – our customers want to smell unique and use a fragrance that says something about them as individuals.”

While mainstream perfume houses focus on glitzy packaging as much as – or sometimes more – than the fragrance, with obscure labels it’s all about the content and artistry. The emphasis is on using higher concentrations of perfume extracts and natural ingredients, which means it can command a premium price. Packaging, by contrast, is often simpler, albeit



sophisticated, in design.

Christa Moreau, the founder of Scent Corner (scentcorner.com), a luxury online emporium that sources unusual scents from around the globe, agrees: “I believe more and more people are prepared to pay a higher price for their perfume as long as it is singular, authentic, while also carrying strong values.

“Only small niche brands have the time to spend several years in the creation of a new fragrance, to use the finest quality of raw materials or to work with craftsmen who can hand craft each bottle,” she explains. “This freedom makes authentic perfumery a real luxury.

“As an example, I recently discovered the omumbiri, a raw material gathered by the indigenous Himba women from Namibia. We now stock some South African brands, such as Frazer Parfum, that are among the only ones in the world to include omumbiri in their creations.”

Derived from the Latin word meaning ‘to choose the best’, new British perfume brand Electimuss also takes inspiration from further afield. The label’s starting point is the ancient Romans, who used only rare and exotic ingredients in their perfumes sourced from their expansive empire (electimussparfum.com). Its Pure Perfume Series

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uses a very high concentration of essential oils – such as that from the Golden Champaca flower found in the Himalayas – making it attractive to perfume aficionados, and giving it unusually long-lasting properties.

Other ‘under-the-radar’ brands – such as Odin New York, Juliette Has A Gun and Thameen – also have their own way of catering for this growing appetite for the unusual. Odin New York’s new White Line scents, for instance, pull together fine, raw materials in pure form and are presented in elegant white-on-white bottles (odinedi.com).

Juliette Has A Gun, founded by Romano Ricci, approaches perfumery as art and has just launched a new luxury collection, with a first offering called Moon Dance. It features exquisite natural ingredients to create an intense floral blend (approximately £180 for 75ml, juliettehasagun.com).

“Our new range has enabled me to indulge myself as a perfumer but also indulge our clients by using some of the most rare and costly ingredients on the market,” Juliette Has A Gun’s Ricci says. “A sumptuous velvety rose absolute and an incredibly sensual tuberose, the most hypnotic of all the white blossoms, are a joy

to work with and to wear. I also hunted down the most beautiful saffron. It is very expensive, but it is incredible.”

No expense is spared with Thameen’s limited edition Palace Oud, which costs £2,500 for 30ml due to its precious ingredients. Rare Indian oud, aged for 12 years, wild Egyptian jasmine and Arabian rose from Taif are brought together in a hand-blown crystal decanter. Consumers need to be quick off the mark, though, as only 100 bottles have been made (thameenfragrance.com).

Finally, Nasomatto, the fragrance project of international creative perfumer Alessandro Gualtieri, aims to offer conceptualised scents that are both radical and unique (nasomatto.com). Having composed perfumes for many fragrance houses, the off-shoot label – translated as ‘crazy nose’ in Italian – was formed to allow Gualtieri the freedom to use a tranche of new ingredients, including camel dung from the Arabian Desert and hashish, with the latter being used as the central ingredient in his stand-out perfume Black Afgano.

“Black Afgano was the first ever ‘black’ fragrance and also the first to feature hashish as its central note,” says industry expert Michael Donovan. “When it launched a few years ago, this scent caused a major stir with beauty buffs. It sold out at Selfridges,

where it was first stocked, instantly and devotees would queue to get their hands on it once they heard that a new batch had arrived. It’s still very hard to get a bottle unless you’re quick. It became the fragrance to copy – although nobody else has got it quite right. It is warm, dark and sensual and smells like nothing else on the market.”

Of course, the ultimate purchase in luxury perfumery is that of your own bespoke scent and for some, only the work of late Jean-Paul Guerlain’s protégée Mathilde Laurent will do. Since 2005, Laurent has been overseeing personal orders as the in-house perfumer at Cartier (cartier.com), where €52,000 (around £38,000) will procure a gold and crystal fragrance bottle, with the options of adding initials, stencilled drawings – and even diamonds. However, Laurent is adamant that the latest trend in perfumery for niche compositions is not about extravagance. “It’s not always the point,” she says. “A three-hour appointment with a perfumer, talking about your life and your pleasures, is a very nice conversation, like taking a walk through your mind. It is often the case that people want something that they can be proud of. They can truly say ‘ok it’s mine’; understanding someone so well is something that is at the heart of human communication.”

