

How to Find Your Signature Scent

Contributed by Joanna McLaughlin
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New perfumes come on the market constantly. Since older fragrances are often slow to retire, this means that just about every year, there are more fragrances available than ever before. If you ever decide to go out and shop for a new perfume or just get something different, you may find the task overwhelming.

So many fragrances, so little time.

How can you navigate this terrain and still come home with a perfume that you really love? Here are some tips for finding a new perfume that you really love.

You need to learn a little bit of the lingo, not to impress the person behind the perfume counter, but to focus your shopping experience. Fragrances are grouped into families or types that share certain characteristics. The exact definitions of the families (even how many families there are) can get a bit blurry, but without sweating the details, here are some broad terms that describe categories of fragrances.

FLORAL refers to scents that are derived from flowers and smell very feminine. It is hard to find a perfume that does not have at least a little bit of flowery stuff in them, but florals are the ones that smell like giant bouquets. By the way, not all florals smell alike-honeysuckles do not smell like roses.

ORIENTAL and SPICE are two terms that are actually slightly different but can be used interchangeably. Orientals make use of things like woods, mosses, and other non-floral botanicals and spices refer to anything from vanilla to cinnamon. These fragrances tend to be strong.

ALDEHYDE is a difficult group to define but if let me give you a great example. Chanel No. 5 is a classic "floral aldehyde." Aldehyde is actually a synthetic molecule used in perfume-making since the 1920s. The best definition I ever heard of it was that it smelled "sparkly."

FRUITY is a very popular family right now and includes all sorts of food-like smells from sugar to papaya to peaches.

There are almost no pure-fruit fragrances but there are a lot of fruity-florals.

CITRUS is the one fruit that ranks by itself. Lots of fragrances use citrus smells, sometimes as notes (elements in a perfume but not the dominant theme-for instance, many classic floral perfumes have some citrus notes thrown in).

A citrus fragrance is dominated by citrus. By the way, citrus includes not just lemons and oranges, but also grapefruits, limes, clementines (a type of orange), and bergamot.

WOODY smells are derived from tree bark, mosses, and other plants. Woody is actually a hyphenated family, such as woody floral (Ralph Lauren's Safari is one of those).

MUSK is a dark, sensual kind of scent that is used in lots of fragrance products. In fact, it would be hard to name a major perfume that did not at least have a hint of musk.

However, some scents have lots of musk. This is not a true fragrance family, but sometimes you'll hear a scent described as musky.

Before you go shopping for perfume, you should know what fragrance families you like. If you do not know, do not panic. In that case, you need to go out and start sampling scents to get a feel for a citrus and a woody floral and an Oriental. Once you can focus on a specific fragrance family, a lot of your shopping work is done.

Approach your perfume counter or online perfume store and start shopping by category. Let's say you're very up-to-the-moment and you're interested in a fruity floral (very big right now). A knowledgeable sales person can direct you to some great examples. Many online perfume websites have ways for you to search perfumes by such descriptions.

One problem with shopping in a department store is that many perfume sales people work specifically for a brand or company. They will likely know their brand quite well but may have sketchy information on other perfumes (or be unwilling to show them to you). Furthermore, department stores often have a somewhat limited number of fragrances available. There are lots of popular perfumes (in the stores) and lots of super niche products (harder to find).

Online resources can get you a broader view of the perfume world, but even they have limitations. (Some niche perfumes are sold only on their own website.)

However, you need to start finding some names of perfumes that meet your criteria. Ask yourself how much of a perfume snob you care to be. For instance, are you willing to go with mainstream (department store) types of scents in your family or are you looking for something trendier or rarer?

Do you want a perfume that is very unusual or hard to find?

Start gathering names of the perfumes that meet your category and shop around. Get informed by reading websites on perfume (there are lots of them;, just Google away).

Learn about perfume boutiques, new or obscure perfumeries, and the full range of all manufacturer's offerings. (For instance, most department stores sell Chanel No. 5 and some other Chanel scents. But if you want to try Chanel No. 19, which is what some call a "green" scent, you have to go to the Chanel site to buy online or find those rare stores that do stock it.)

Sample perfume if you can. This can be done in department stores and many online sites will allow you to purchase either small samples or, if you buy other stuff, to get a sample or two. If a department store knows you as a good customer, you can get samples there. Magazines with sniffable pages are another option, but not as good.

The reason to try the actual perfume on your skin is simple. You need to know how the perfume and you are going to get along. Scents can smell differently on different people (a phenomenon attributable to skin chemistry and also how much you sweat, oh, I mean perspire).

Furthermore, there is an interesting process in perfume wearing that perfume lovers know about and many newbies do not. It is called the "drydown." Quite simply, perfumes smell one way out of the bottle and when they first hit your skin. However, after a couple of minutes, the perfume can change, often significantly, and you get another scent.

Even more remarkable, the drydown (which lasts a couple of hours, usually) can mellow out into some base notes. Many perfumes are actually three distinct fragrances: what you smell with the first squirt, what you're wearing ten minutes later, and then what you have on at the end of the day.

It is very easy to be fooled by top notes, that is, the smell of perfume out of the bottle. Most perfume makers spend an awful lot of time getting the top notes right because, quite frankly, top notes can sell a perfume. But you're really not going to ever wear the top notes. They're more like the overture. So you need to put the fragrance on your skin and then see how it wears.

It may be that you love the top notes but don't much care for the drydown-a sad fact of life for the perfume lover.

The converse can also be true: you may not care for the top notes but find the perfume that's "underneath" is exactly

right for you.

Sample a lot. If you're in a perfume frenzy, buy a nice classic scent (they're almost always great) and then take your time sampling and shopping to find that elusive "absolutely you" scent.

Don't assume that the perfume you loved years ago still works as well for you today. Assuming the formulation of your scent has not changed (many scents get updated over the years), your skin chemistry may have. Hormones, stress level, even the quality of your skin can impact how a perfume smells. Furthermore, our personalities develop as we age and the exuberant floral scent you wore as a kid may seem childish to you today.

Joanna McLaughlin is a perfume enthusiast and frequent contributor to <http://theperfume-reporter.com> . Her favorite scent today is Burberry Brit.