

DEPARTURES

DEPARTURES NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2013

*Big, Bold
Jewels*
p236

*Your Own
Private Caribbean*
p66

*Shopping
the World*
p148

*...Let the
Holidays Begin!*

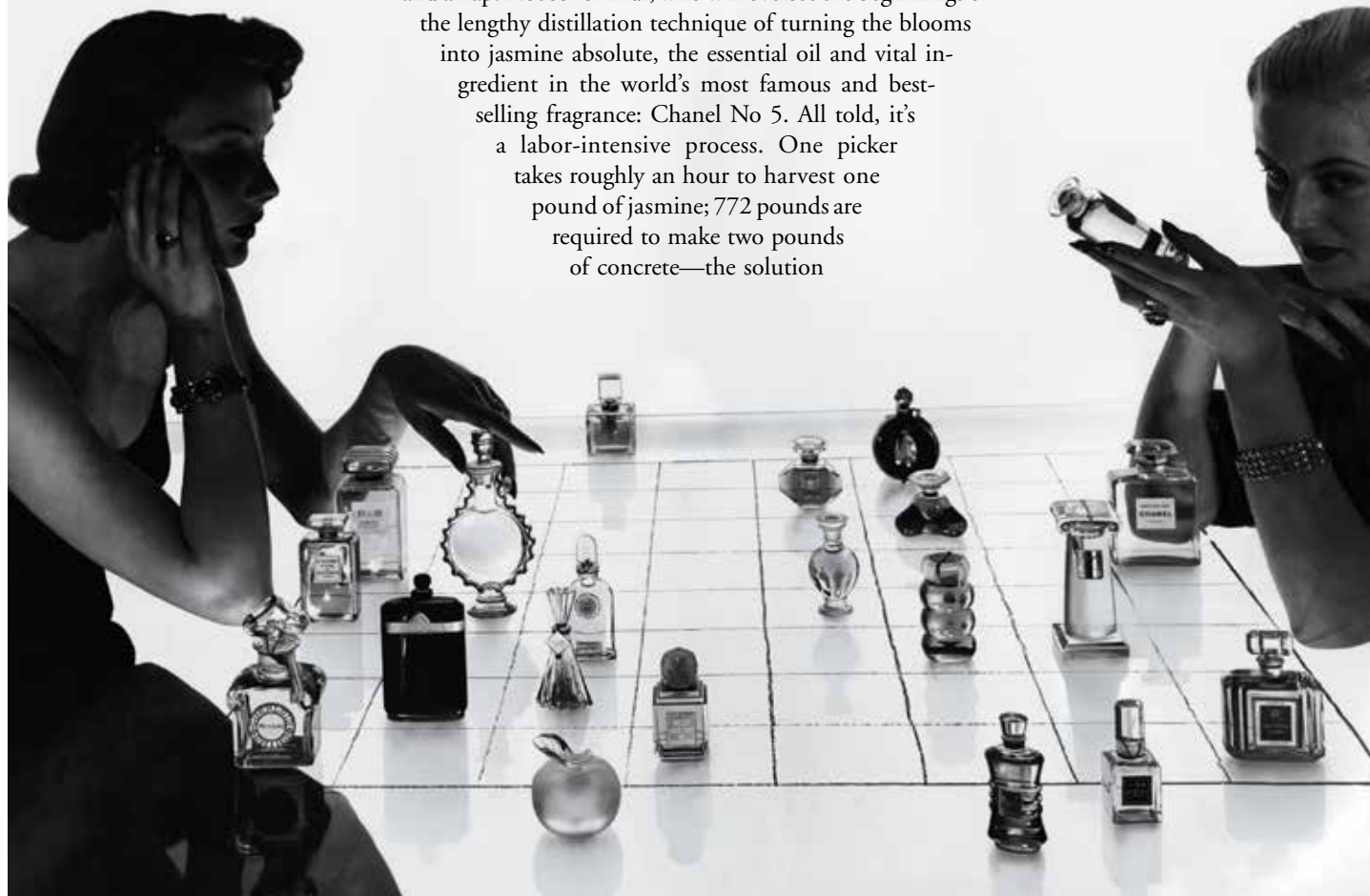
THE BUSINESS OF SCENT

A Whiff of Something Real

As mass-produced perfumes become the new normal, the origin of a fragrance is more important than ever. **TINA GAUDOIN** reports from Grasse, the ancient home of perfume and the jasmine fields of Chanel No 5.

Joseph Mul drives his battered pickup into the dusty, rutted field of *Jasminum grandiflorum* shrubs. It is 9 A.M. on a warm, slightly overcast September morning in Pégomas in southern France, about four miles from Grasse, the ancient home of perfume. In front of Mul's truck, which is making easy work of the tough terrain, a small army of colorfully dressed pickers, most hailing from Eastern Europe, fans out, backs bent in pursuit of the elusive jasmine bloom that flowers overnight and must be harvested from the three-foot-high bushes before noon.

By lunchtime, the petals will have been weighed by Mul, the numbers noted in the ledger (bonuses are paid by the kilo), and the pickers, who have been working since before dawn, will retire for a meal and a nap. Not so for Mul, who will oversee the beginnings of the lengthy distillation technique of turning the blooms into jasmine absolute, the essential oil and vital ingredient in the world's most famous and best-selling fragrance: Chanel No 5. All told, it's a labor-intensive process. One picker takes roughly an hour to harvest one pound of jasmine; 772 pounds are required to make two pounds of concrete—the solution



The post-World War II era marked the beginning of mass fragrance, when women wore perfume for more than just special occasions.

from which comes jasmine absolute. One ounce of the perfume contains 1,000 jasmine flowers and 12 May roses (also grown by Mul exclusively for Chanel); the story goes that someone somewhere buys a bottle—an ounce costs \$325—every 30 seconds.

The doughty Mul has the hand of history on his shoulder in the form of his great-grandfather, who farmed the fields before him. Jacques Polge, Chanel's master perfumer, has a specter, too: the late, great Ernest Beaux, legendary creator of No 5, who first walked the fields with Coco Chanel in the 1920s. The exclusive partnership between the house of Chanel and the Mul family began in 1987, when, as Polge recounts, jasmine production in Grasse was slowing down, and "we feared there would no longer be enough for our formulas." In a move typical of a company whose founder was fond of saying "success is often achieved by those who don't know that failure is inevitable," Chanel took control of the entire production chain. The mutually beneficial relationship is an attempt to promote and foster the ancient art of growing jasmine and May rose, since much of the flower-to-fragrance market has been transferred to more cost-effective locations such as Bulgaria, Egypt, North Africa and India. (Chanel does source from these locations, just not for No 5.)

In a world in which the consumer is ever more sophisticated, the backstory of a fragrance—its origin together with aspects of its sustainability—is crucial. And these green fields, sheltered by the hills of Grasse and fanned by a warm wind from the Mediterranean, are the front line in the battle for the hearts, minds and pocketbooks of luxury fragrance consumers around the globe. To the winners (currently players like Chanel and LVMH-owned Dior) go the spoils of an industry projected to exceed \$36 billion by 2017, according to a 2012 report by market researcher Global Industry Analysts. To the losers, a loss of brand, face and revenue as they sink ever deeper into the morass of "masstige" perfumes threatening to overwhelm the market.

The "massification" of luxury fragrance—the aping of the marketing and advertising techniques of the premium perfume segment by brands with no history of fragrance creation but plenty of experience making clothes and handbags—materialized in the 1980s and '90s and helped plenty of companies regain financial footing. "The designer perfumes, particularly those of the '90s, were cash cows," says fragrance consultant Michael Donovan. People who couldn't otherwise afford the offerings of a luxury brand could now buy the scent of luxury. But the fledgling fragrance creators also set in motion a new host of problems for established perfume houses like Chanel: How to set oneself apart? The thorny question was further underlined by the proliferation of celebrity fragrances, beginning with Liz Taylor and Cher in 1987 and culminating in scents today by everyone from Alan Cumming and Jennifer Aniston to Justin Bieber. "Both the celebrity fragrance

and masstige markets often take the approach of one fragrance and we are out," says Donovan. "It's all about the money."

However, massification did educate a whole new generation of consumers who, at the luxury end of the market, are proving far more discerning than was first imagined. "The Internet has had a big impact on the fragrance market," says Donovan. "There are now so many informed perfume fans. Fragrance isn't tangible, but it has a smell. The story behind the smell has become key."

Independent perfumer Frédéric Malle (who is represented by

Donovan) was an early-21st-century game-changer with his drive to make heroes out of fragrance ingredients. Renowned perfumers like Dominique Ropion, Maurice Roucel and Sophia Grojsman, all of whom have collaborated with Malle to create such scents as *Portrait of a Lady*, *Musc Ravageur* and *Carnal Flower*, have been integral to the fragrance world (the perfume equivalent of attending a classical concert where the composer is conducting). "It was the independent perfumers," says Donovan, "who led the luxury houses by the nose. They proved that consumers wanted to know about a fragrance's genesis."



A picker harvests jasmine blooms at Maison Mul, about four miles outside Grasse, in the South of France.

When I sit down with Polge and Chanel's perfume director, Christopher Sheldrake, in the shade opposite the factory

where the jasmine concrete is being created from the morning's harvest, the scent of

steamed, slightly scorched jasmine hangs heavy in the air. "Synthetics cannot give the same complexity and richness to a fragrance," says Polge, who is explaining what he thinks differentiates their fragrance's backstory from the rest: natural ingredients combined with age-old practices, like hand-harvesting. (Earlier, Mul had demonstrated the snapping motion required to remove the flower from its stalk—the movement is so particular that it cannot be mechanized.)

"Natural is very important for us. In perfume, 'natural' is synonymous with quality," says Sheldrake. The Mul family has never used pesticides on its more than 40 acres. "Bees can't even help," jokes Mul, since jasmine self-pollinates. Chanel maintains its quality and consistency by combining absolutes produced over the course of an entire season's harvest. For collecting time is limited for both of the delicate blooms: Jasmine lasts for 100 days, usually starting in August; May rose for three weeks in May.

The dissolution of Grasse's fragrance fields is an apt metaphor for the massification of perfume and the dilution of the ancient art itself, which has been practiced in the South of France since the 1600s. The region was once home to a vast leather-tanning industry, where tanners applied flower-fragranced animal fat to their products, in a process called *enfleurage*, to disguise the toxic scent given off by the newly treated skin.

When Ernest Beaux chose the jasmine of Grasse for Chanel's mold-breaking fragrance (called No 5, the number of the sample chosen by Coco), fields of the flower abounded. But that was

before 20th-century real estate developers realized what a gold mine they had in the Mediterranean coastline along the southeast corner of France, where the global elite had been sunning themselves since the arrival of the railroad in the mid-1800s. As the fields were being built on, fragrance was steadily making itself available to the masses. Miss Dior, introduced in 1947 as a counterpoint to the restraints of the postwar years, was arguably the first mass fragrance; yet up until the introduction of Charlie! by Revlon and Jovan Musk during the 1970s, perfume was still regarded as something to be worn only for special occasions.

By the time Chanel made the decision to preserve jasmine and May rose fields for its own purposes in 1987, a fraction of the original acres of cultivatable land remained. (The jasmine required for No 5 is specific: a hybrid grafted to the local medicinal jasmine centuries ago to harden it against the chilly French winters. Chanel uses 90 percent of the jasmine in Grasse and close to one third of the world's entire production.)

Over the next several years, blockbuster perfumes such as Giorgio Beverly Hills, YSL's Opium, Dior's Poison, Calvin Klein's Obsession and Elizabeth Taylor's White Diamonds not only created a need for the mass cultivation of flowers but also necessitated the synthetic production of floral accords to satisfy the more cost-conscious end of the market. Polge is in little doubt of what has happened to fragrance over the past few decades: "There has been a banalization of perfume. It's like a supermarket. We are fighting against that."

Chanel is not alone in its belief that heritage, authenticity and quality are the key weapons for the future in a fragrance house's arsenal. At Hermès, legendary perfumer Jean Claude Ellena advocates for ownership of ingredients to assure provenance and specificity of raw materials. But perhaps even more crucially, "we can protect the formulas for our perfumes," he says. Dior perfumer François Demachy agrees that ingredients define a luxury fine fragrance but thinks it's less about "owning" the materials than developing relationships with the producers. "I regularly go to Grasse and meet with the owner of the Domaine de Manon, which exclusively produces jasmine and rose for J'adore l'Or," he says. For Demachy, the raw materials must be controlled and individually selected—"each ingredient can vary depending upon its quality."

Tracing a fragrance from "seed to scent" is not new; what is new is that heritage fragrance houses have recognized the need to tell that tale. Their appeal, after all, is rooted in the history and accomplishments of their brands and not in the capriciousness of the fashion world (a claim that might well be made of any designer without a lengthy and successful track record of produc-



**"TODAY'S
[PERFUME
INDUSTRY]
is like a
supermarket,"
SAYS CHANEL
NOSE JACQUES
POLGE. "WE
ARE FIGHTING
AGAINST
THAT."**

ing scents). Giorgio Armani, Tom Ford, Marc Jacobs and Bottega Veneta—all are tony brands, but all have elected to utilize existing fragrance manufacturers, L'Oréal, Estée Lauder and Coty, respectively, to create their perfumes.

Paul Austin, of the Austin Advisory Group, which specializes in telling the story of heritage brands, helped to develop the official concept of seed to scent with Robertet, the Grasse-based flavors and fragrance house. Austin says the idea of following a fragrance from genesis to shelf allows perfumers to connect with consumers, revealing the nuances of how a scent comes to life. To visit the Robertet headquarters in Grasse is to take a trip back through fragrance history. The building and factory were designed by Gustav Eiffel for the Robertet family when it took over the company (founded in 1850) in 1875. The boardroom boasts an exact copper replica of the perfumer's old extraction unit on a smaller scale; photographs of the many generations of Mauberts, the family that has been with the company from its inception through today, line the walls.

Julien Maubert, young (age 27), hungry and dapper, is the director of the raw-materials division for France and a fifth-generation Robertet. His American education has equipped him well for the increasingly competitive marketplace within which he operates, and he radiates energy and conviction for the seed-to-scent cause. Robertet was one of the early companies to acknowledge the importance of sustainable, quantifiable ingredient production with quality control at the source. "We are a one-stop shop for fragrance houses because we know how to find

the best raw materials and how to transform them," says Maubert, citing as proof a joint venture Robertet is working on with a Malagasy family on 500 acres of land in Madagascar, where ylang-ylang oil is sustainably farmed and produced. "The problem we found with ylang-ylang was that suppliers were adulterating the essential oil with vegetable oil. We are now involved from the beginning, so we can trace everything."

Luxury perfumer Lyn Harris, of Miller Harris (and one of the UK's only female, French-taught noses), has worked with Robertet for years. "They have long been using sustainable business methods and working closely with producers," she says. "Their oils are among the best out there." Harris, who charges upwards of \$19,000 for an exclusive one-of-a-kind fragrance created with premium ingredients, says she has some misgivings about luxury-goods firms who claim that they own the production of their flowers. "It's great that they do it, but the amount of flowers they grow is so small in relation to their overall production, it probably works best as a marketing and PR tool." Harris certainly knows about mass production meeting

elitist perfumery: She recently collaborated on a best-selling range of fragrances with London-based department store behemoth Marks & Spencer.

But sustainably sourced ingredients are expensive, and many companies are not prepared to pay the price. This is where the cheaper, adulterated ingredients creep into the fragrance chain. "Today many launches spend their money on packaging, bottle design, merchandising, advertising and talent, leaving little for the product itself. In the past, investment in the fragrance oil was two to three times greater than it is today," says a 2010 report in *Global Cosmetics Industry Magazine*. But the cheapening and massification of fragrance is an opportunity for the überluxe houses like Chanel, which also markets Les Exclusifs de Chanel, a line of 13 perfumes, some of which are updates of original formulas created by Beaux and Coco. Austin says, "We are returning to a more authentic way of creating special fragrances, which means something."

Harris points to the Chinese market as a benchmark for modern progress and enormous opportunity: "The Chinese want the best. They won't be fooled by logos and mass luxury. They love craft." Hermès's Ellena echoes that sentiment: "Countries like India and China have learned the marketing techniques that we have developed over the last 30 years. They will give us fierce competition in years to come. Our future lies in creativity, quality and service. It's this dedication that will make customers faithful to current brands. The price of a product isn't an obstacle if the difference is obvious."

There in the cradle of fragrance, where the afternoon sun is cooling, we are about as far away from the thrust and parry of the competitive luxury-fragrance market as you can get. Joseph Mul says he is happy with the morning's yield. "I knew it would be good when I woke up this morning. I love these fields," he says, laughing as I reluctantly trade in my neon-pink Chanel Wellingtons (thoughtfully supplied by the company) for my own far more conservative footwear.

As far as Polge is concerned, the small fragrance farm in southern France underscores Chanel Parfums' mission for the most significant fragrance ever produced. "The quality of No 5 stands so far apart from everything else," he says. "It is our duty to protect it." ♦

