

FALL 2009 SUPPLEMENT PERFUMES: THE A-Z GUIDE

This fall, *Style* magazine, the Sunday fashion supplement to the *Times of London*, asked Luca to review a slew of new feminine and masculine fragrances for them. He spent as much time and care doing so as he did on reviews for our book and so was dismayed to find his work cut down considerably and altered when the article was finally published in the November 22, 2009 issue. I encouraged him to simply publish the originals on our website as a free download. It seemed a shame to waste them or wait two years to reveal them. So here they are. TS

Alberta Ferretti (Alberta Ferretti) ★★
chocolate amber

Seventeen years and several hundred Angel clones later, perfumers are still ordered to endlessly shuffle the same deck made of twos and threes and hope for a royal flush. This busted thing is a hybrid between the chocolate of Angel and the amber of Fendi Theorema, without the fun of the former or the seriousness of the latter. LT

Ambre Nuit (Dior) ★★★★★ *rose amber*

With perfumes as with voices, the difference between blandness and mystery is made by differences you perceive but never quite

understand. Ambre Nuit, the fourth in a distinguished series of upmarket “colognes” by Dior, initially feels like a well-rehearsed ambery rose ultimately derived from Chanel’s wonderful Bois des Iles. It is, however, a bit static in comparison, with none of the mulled-wine swirling warmth of its forebear. But just as you decide to lose interest and walk away, like a recalcitrant mynah bird the thing speaks to you in a strange, plangent tone. You then realize that the perfumer (François Demachy) meant all along to stop the motion at that exact point, somewhere between biscuit, floor wax and wet hair. Brilliant. LT

Brioni (Brioni) ★★★★★ *classic citrus*

Unadventurous, stylish masculine made with good materials. The first few minutes quote Eau Sauvage before the composition moves on to a solid, well-constructed woody-citrus heart. LT

Chloé EdP Intense (Coty) ★ *dry downer*

The original 1975 Chloé, now marketed as “Classic” was a lush, lovely tuberose far ahead of its time. This thing is a flanker to a modernized version released in 2008, that is to say a gratuitous variation on the pointless. What is interesting about it is that in a desperate search for originality Michel Almairac and Amandine Marie have piled on the metallic musk and dry woody notes. The composition feels halfway between something designed to cover household bleach and a cheap masculine in the Cacharel Pour l’Homme manner. Louis Aragon once said that Woman was the future of Man. In fragrances, it’s the other way round. LT

CK Free (Calvin Klein) ★★★★★ *iced coffee*

Masculine perfumery now resembles architecture in highly regulated neighborhoods: to get planning permission, the fragrance must have the same height, width, window area and number of floors as all others, and be painted the same white and pigeon grey. No sneaky roof extensions, no open-plan kitchens. The exact shade of powder blue on the corridor wall becomes the only space left for invention. On interminable terraced Bloke Pong Road, no. 361 (that's how many woody masculines have come out since 2003 according to fragrancesoftheworld.info) is where CK Free lives. Nice place, airy and light, clever warm touches of coffee and liquorice, should be easy to sell. ¶

Cologne Noire (Van Cleef & Arpels) ★★★ *lemon pepper*

There are by now 43 fragrances out there whose name contains the word Noir (black) or Noire, most of them recent, which suggests a mini-trend is at work. This one initially fools you into thinking that it is a reassuringly dull herbaceous-woody masculine for timid suits. Ten minutes later, it turns out to be a clever, high-quality example of perfumer Mark Buxton's justly celebrated fragrance style: a subtle, transparent woody-peppery composition. Not earth-shaking, but fresh, dry, quiet, persistent and very nice to wear. ¶

D&G : 1 Le Bateleur (Dolce & Gabbana)★★ *hissy citrus*

Named after the first card of the Tarot, the guy with the infinity-shaped hat, and first of a series based on the twenty-two Major Arcana of which seven appear to have been released to date. Interesting only insofar as it is a supposedly unisex fragrance comprising a screechy floral and marine notes usually seen in ditzzy feminines from Eau d'Issey onwards. Those accords are, to my mind, like having your teeth scraped with steel hooks by an angry dentist. I see no reason why a man in his right mind would wear this. ¶

Dover Street Market (Comme des Garçons) ★★★ *clean wood*

CdG repeats itself with an endless stream of smell-alikes inspired by Mark Buxton's nineties masterpieces, all with transparent woody-resinous notes up top, mostly fresh and salubrious but a little short on development. This one smells better on paper than on skin, where the transition to a cheap drydown happens far too soon. If you like this genre, get Comme des Garçons 2 Woman or, better still, Timbuktu from l'Artisan Parfumeur. ¶

Eau d'Ambre (Prada)★★ *amber cologne*

Expensive materials but boring cologne-like structure with an amber drydown and no staying power. Who would knowingly shell out for this? ¶

Eau Mega (Viktor & Rolf) ★★★ *melon honey*

My mother used to wear a Jeanne Gatineau night cream that had the consistency of chocolate mousse but was pistachio green: it smelled fresh and soothing like this fragrance of melon and cut plant stems. Curious that such a small-scale, low-key composition should be packaged with such bombast in gold and sold under the catchphrase "Megafy Yourself!" ¶

F by Ferragamo Black (Salvatore Ferragamo) ★★★ *amber lavender*

Crude but ultimately charming sweet-lavender masculine, made interesting by its alarming resemblance to a feminine composition. If the bottle were pink instead of black, and a smidgin of fruity notes were added, this would be mainstream girly. Wear it if you're handsome, under 25 and use lots of hair gel. LT

F for Fascinating Night (Salvatore Ferragamo) ★ *vile floral*

If they make a time capsule and put in it paragons of 2009 sadness such as grey Crocs in EUR size 44, a DVD of Microsoft Vista Home Premium and the collected speeches of Silvio Berlusconi, FFFN should be included, for it embodies all that is wrong with contemporary perfumery: the smell from three different shampoos mixed together and sold for real money, in the ugliest bottle imaginable. F for Fuhgeddaboutit. LT

Flower Essentielle (Kenzo) ★★★★★ *powdery floral*

When François Demachy left the Chanel engine room to oversee LVMH perfumery, the rest of us finally got to appreciate his skills to the full. His *Escale à Portofino* (Dior) was basically a Cologne, and as such not particularly original or striking, but all the more impressive for being so beautifully executed, with a richness of texture and detail that made it a joy to smell again and again. *Flower Essentielle* is another such marvel, basically a vanillic floral leaning in the mimosa direction and including (like the original *Flower*) a striking quotation of Caron's *Royal Bain de Champagne*. What makes it special is that every effect, from the powdery blast up top to the quiet *crème anglaise* drydown, lies within a perfectly smooth off-white surface that slips past you like a huge caress. *Essentielle* is also a technical marvel: Powdery effects were the province of heliotropin before EU regulations drastically restricted its use. Demachy's composition somehow gets around this with what feels like a mixture of vanillin, musk and helional. Everyone's been trying to do that for years, but this is the first time I see it work properly. LT

Grey Vetiver (Tom Ford) ★★★ *soapy vetiver*

A worthy addition to a field crowded with good vetivers (Guerlain, Malle, Givenchy). An unusually complex, polished, melancholy composition, soapy and well-scrubbed against a refined woody-musky background. Close in spirit to Patricia de Nicolaï's wonderful candle, *Vetiver de Java*. LT

Idole (Giorgio Armani) ★★★ *floral polish*

Armani, usually a stickler for originality, must have missed the memo on this one: the name is *Lubin*, the bottle *Azzaro Couture*. The fragrance is better than that. *Idole* fashionably mixes a cute floral up top with a shoe-polish base at bottom and nothing much in between. The middle is, of course, the hard bit, on which classical fragrances once expected to be judged. Instead of a heart, *Idole* manages a surprising bland cool moment after the top runs out and before the drydown kicks in. Unmemorable but not unpleasant. LT

Idylle (Guerlain) ★★★ *citrus chypre*

Part of the presiding genius of Guerlain, even when at its least inventive, has always been to reinterpret the fashionable and do it slightly better. Jacques Guerlain famously followed up every one of François Coty's great inventions with another in his own manner. Idylle has something of this tendency, except that the model in this case was not worth redoing well: the modern citrus chypre, a size-zero, sour little slip of a thing with no discernible brains. Making such a fragrance interesting without losing your target audience is, to borrow Kenny Everett's phrase, like climbing Everest from the inside. Guerlain clearly tried, to the extent of enlisting the brilliant Annick Ménardo in addition to in-house perfumer Thierry Wasser to do Idylle. And it almost works, in the sense that if you ignore the trivial shape of the fragrance and turn up the magnification, you find that every cliché in it has been given a tiny but interesting twist this way and that. It's as if Idylle were a bumper sticker in small print that says, *If you can read this buy Nahema*. ¶

Jil (Jil Sander) ★★ *boring retro*

The Jil Sander range is full of competent, understated, solidly built fragrances that bring to mind the Stella slogan "reassuringly expensive". This one is an outlier: "alarmingly cheap" would be more like it, a composition that takes one quarter Kenzo Amour, three quarters Allure and smells like the exhaust from a laundry room. ¶

Kenzopower Cologne (Kenzo) ★★ *wet weekend*

A commendable effort at a floral masculine, a genre traditionally doomed to failure. This said, it is difficult to wish this instance of it any success. KC is a flat, linear affair with no story to tell, very chemical in feel, lying in a grey, overcast region equidistant between Je Reviens and Allure (both feminines). If it were a touch more vulgar and better made, it could have had a rough Brut-like charm. As is, dismal and unwearable. ¶

Lola (Marc Jacobs) ★★ *fruity floral*

Another boring, loud fruity floral, but in a good-fun plastic flower bottle. Great for a present to someone you don't like. ¶

Parisienne (Yves Saint Laurent) ★★ *tired floral*

One feels sorry for the great Sophia Grojsman, half-credited for this adaptation of her huge and hugely influential Paris (1983). For someone who designed such a monument to have to turn her own stately pile into poky flats must be hard. What is served up here for the nth time, cold as the grave, is not even an YSL idea, as in Rive Gauche, but a postcard myth: The ads of Kate Moss having an out-of-the-knickers experience in a limo along the Seine only lack Tom (of Tom & Jerry) sporting a little mustache and speaking to her in a Charles Boyer voice: "*My lurve is not a sparque, but a reuring flame*." The fragrance? After the regulation strident hi-how-are-you blast of hygienic peach fuzz, there follows a competent but derivative chemical floral that lasts until your next all-over exfoliation. ¶

Patchouli Nobile (Nobile 1942) ★★★ *amber patchouli*

My present dislike of this style of fragrance is partly due to embarrassing recollections of the days when I perceived it as a sign that I was in the company of people whose ideas (or total lack thereof) I agreed with. But that was a long time ago, and in the meantime the Orientalist tendency in fragrance, inaugurated in 1993 by Ambre Sultan, has rescued patchouli and amber from the hippie aesthetic. PN is a very nice patchouli, earthy but not oily, ambery but not treacly, and with a remarkable pipe-tobacco and fruitcake note in the centre tying the fragrance together. Warm, cozy and pleasant at all times. LT

Ricci Ricci (Nina Ricci)★★ *garish floral*

There's a good idea in here somewhere, a vivid accord of sour, bitter and sweet fruit, and it might have worked had the perfumers been given more time and money. As it is, it feels like one of those artworks you get to make at fun fairs by dropping paint on a rotating piece of card: a dark red splodge on a background of leaf green and cadmium yellow. LT

Rose the One (Dolce &Gabbana) ★★★ *complicated rose*

Some perfumes exist because of art direction, some in spite of it, in a manner reminiscent of Monty Python's credit to the BBC "without which anything is possible." This is one of the latter. The contrast between the skillful perfumery work and the unrelenting naffness of everything else, —bottle, advertising guff, etc.—is unusually stark. Perfumer Michel Girard, in my opinion an underrated talent, has achieved something stealthily remarkable. Charged with a nauseating brief for a fragrance aimed at the "mischievously beguiling yet tender coquette" and given what does not smell like a vast budget, he has done a rose accord that is neither sour, banal nor cloying. Perhaps the most interesting thing about his composition is an astonishing basil heart note, clearly made from parts. The prevailing molecule in basil, ocimenol, is not chemically stable and in any event does not reproduce the plant aroma well. Girard's mysterious inner-voice accord does, and I'll wager it will be taught at perfume school before long. LT

Scarlett (Cacharel) ★ *vile floral*

What were they thinking? The bottle cap feebly attempts to resemble the delicious Art Deco Coty powder boxes of the thirties and ends up like a plastic loo freshener, the box looks like it's been pre-faded for years in a sunlit shop front. The perfume is dyed a mandarin-liqueur color that says "stay away". The smell is so disastrously awful that I cannot imagine how perfumers like Olivier Cresp and Alberto Morillas can bear to be in the same room as this stuff, never mind compose it. Just so you know: it is a combination between a peony-type fruity-floral (the perfumery equivalent of a nasal mall-rat accent) with a huge overdose of dry-lemon and metallic musk à la Light Blue (the perfumery equivalent of a chainsaw). Quite simply one of the worst fragrances I have ever smelled. LT

A Scent by Issey Miyake (Issey Miyake) ★★★★★ *retro floral*

Issey Miyake's fragrances have always been futuristic and seldom boring, and as a result enjoyed both hits and misses in sales success, my favorite (Feu d'Issey) being among the disasters. The pretentiously named A Scent, composed by the excellent Daphné Bugey, is unsettling, almost uncanny. It's as if the Bakelite TV set you bought in a flea market suddenly woke up and started

broadcasting a B&W variety show from fifty years ago. Soon you realize that this is none other than the *Parapluies de Cherbourg* style of fragrance come back from the dead, a classic, perky, slightly acid green floral chypre in the style of Saint Laurent's Y. It goes almost without saying that in the meantime formula cost has gone down severalfold, and that modern versions of fresh, airy classics are bound to feel a little fake and functional. I would never have expected Miyake to do retro, but this one is pretty good. LT

She Wood Velvet Forest Wood (Dsquared) ★★★ *woody fig*

A well worked-out woody-figleaf fragrance. Pleasant and unremarkable. LT

Standard (Artek) ★★★ *weak incense*

I remember when the great coach-builder Giorgetto Giugiaro designed a shape of pasta for Barilla; it did well in the wind tunnel but wouldn't cook right. Same here: Artek is the Finnish furniture firm founded by the Aalto brothers in 1935 and responsible for many masterpieces of modern design. For some no doubt very hip reason they teamed up with Comme des Garçons and brought out...a beautifully packaged frankincense fragrance (so last year). Get Armani's Bois d'Encens, Amouage's Jubilation XXV or Heeley's Cardinal instead. LT