



The SCENTS of a CITY

In Paris, avant-garde artisan perfumers are distilling a fragrance revolution, discovers **Lily Heise**



Nestled on a quiet side street of Paris’s artsy Montmartre neighbourhood is an elegant shop. Through its large glass windows, you can see a sparkling crystal chandelier and a wall of dark wood shelves decorated with carefully curated items. It has all the allure of a cabinet of curiosities, but pushing open the door, a gust of delicate fragrance reveals the true nature of the shop’s wares. You’ve stepped inside Abstraction Paris, the latest in Paris’s growing number of artisan perfumers.

Known the world over for its perfume, France’s fragrance heritage goes back to at least the Renaissance. However, the industry blossomed in the 18th century when perfumes were used to mask unpleasant odours resulting from the era’s common practice of infrequent bathing. Instead of applying standard scents, royals and nobles began commissioning custom fragrances to reflect their personalities. Thanks to its balmy micro-climate, perfect for flower production, the southern French town of Grasse forged its place as the capital of perfume, but the creative process gradually shifted to the capital.

Throughout the 20th century, most French fashion houses created perfumes to represent their brand, and while these still dominate the industry, an olfactory revolution has been percolating in French perfume over the last few decades.

“Consumers are increasingly interested in original scents, and niche brands now make up around 20% of the market,” says Sébastien Plan, perfumer and founder of Abstraction. “It isn’t that artisans are better, they just have a different approach. Big companies generally don’t take risks and allow their designers complete creative freedom.”

One of the first artisan perfumers to launch their own brand was Serge Lutens, who had previously designed cosmetics for Dior and a scent for Shiseido. His creations don’t simply have a unique smell; they are, in his words, “fragrances that make you think.” Organised into olfactory families, from floral to ambery, his mind-stimulating blends are beautifully displayed in his Palais Royal boutique, whose neon purple lighting, sensational spiral staircase and esoteric symbolism set the tone for his sensorial experience.



Nearby is the intimate boutique of Pierre Guillaume, a former chemist and modern artisan perfumer. Guillaume’s inspired perfumes tell a story that, through their blend and name, connect in different ways to each person. Since his first creation in 2002, the spicy-tobacco scented 02 Cozé, Guillaume has created over 100 unisex fragrances, as well as body care products, candles and home scents, all handcrafted in his workshop in central France’s Auvergne region.

A short walk away and a few doors down from the original Chanel boutique on Rue Cambon, is Memo Paris. Its founders, husband-and-wife team Clara and John Molloy, consider perfume to be a journey. Their blends embody places both near and far, like Paris’s Latin Quarter and Odéon districts, Portugal’s Sintra, Greece’s Ithaca and even intergalactic destinations reached via *étoiles filantes*, or shooting stars. With Orient-Express-style windows and leather-trunk-shaped displays, their boutique complements their fragrance’s invitation to travel.

from top left:
Editions de Parfums by Frédéric Malle presents a collection of scents by star perfumers; the boutique of Abstraction Paris, the first perfumery to offer aged perfumes; Memo Paris’s fragrances are inspired by evocative destinations around the world; Juliette Has a Gun specialises in pure scents, like its most popular line of Not a Perfume



WHERE TO BUY

- Abstraction Paris,**
22 Rue Houdon, 75018 Paris
- Serge Lutens,**
142 Galerie de Valois, 75001 Paris
- Pierre Guillaume,**
13 Rue Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 75001 Paris
- Memo Paris,**
24 Rue Cambon, 75001 Paris
- Editions de Parfums Frédéric Malle,**
13 Rue des Francs Bourgeois, 75004 Paris
- Juliette Has a Gun,**
2 Rue des Francs Bourgeois, 75003 Paris

Venturing over to the fashionable Marais district, you’ll find a high concentration of artisan perfumers. On its main shopping street, Rue des Francs Bourgeois, is the boutique Editions du Parfum by Frédéric Malle, another pioneer of avant-garde scents. In the early 2000s, Malle endeavoured to help save high perfumery by setting up his own house that collaborates with the country’s best ‘noses,’ highly skilled perfume designers.

A few steps away and next to the majestic Place des Vosges, is the sleek boutique Juliette Has a Gun, a niche perfume house founded in 2006 by Romano Ricci, the great-grandson of designer Nina Ricci. Aiming to empower women through beauty, the brand especially appeals to a younger clientele who identify with its modern, minimalist creations. It’s not surprising that the house’s most popular fragrance is “Not a Perfume”, a scent made of only one element, Cetalex, a base note in perfumery.

Our olfactive journey takes us back up to Abstraction in Montmartre. Established in 2022, the brand is a collaboration between five young innovative perfumers. “We all met 15 years ago while studying perfume in Grasse and went on to work for large perfume houses,” says Sébastien Plan, the brand’s founder. “I eventually realised that if I wanted to work for the ideal brand, I would have to do it myself.”

The brand’s philosophy and its scents reflect the meaning of the word abstraction, that is, a moment shared with another person that is so special we live this moment through the other. To achieve this, the brand’s designers created two complementary scents with symbiotic titles such as ‘Here We Belong’ and ‘Slow Burn Desire’. Another component that makes Abstraction unique is its offering of aged perfumes. Just like wine, perfume also evolves with time and clients will be able to select from different *millésimes*, or years, of each label. ■