

The fragrance makers

For your own personal fragrance, the *parfumeur* will blend amber, tonquin musk and iris root, cinnamon and sandalwood – some far more precious than gold – writes Lucy Gordan

THE fragrances sold all over the world in duty-free shops, department stores and specialty shops had their genesis in ancient Egypt, where tomb remains reveal the use of fragrant ointments and oils, and beyond.

Avicenna, a 10th-century Arab physician and philosopher, is said to have discovered the distillation process that greatly reduced the cost of making the essential oils used in perfumery. Knowledge of distillation spread through Europe during the Middle Ages as the Crusaders returned with samples of Arab essences.

The first modern perfume, made of essential oils blended in alcohol solution, was made in 1370 at the command of Queen Elizabeth of Hungary. It was known throughout Europe as Hungary Water.

The art of perfumery prospered in Renaissance Florence – even Leonardo da Vinci was an expert in distillation, especially of laurel – and in the 16th

century, Florentine culinary and perfumery refinements were taken to Paris by Catherine de' Medici, the young bride of the future French King Henry II, and her personal perfumer, Renato Bianco. Thus France quickly became the European centre of perfume manufacture, a position it still holds.

"The burning of incense that accompanied the religious rites of ancient China, Palestine and Egypt led gradually to the personal use of perfume," says Lorenzo Villoresi, who likes to consider himself a disciple of both Avicenna and fellow Florentine Catherine de' Medici. Thirty-nine-year-old Villoresi has combined his love of history, travel, and spicy cuisine into an unusual profession, *parfumeur*.

As a post-graduate researcher in philosophy, Villoresi travelled widely in Asia and the Middle East; through India, Israel, Jordan, Sinai, along the Red Sea, and Egypt. He felt particularly at home in Egypt,



undoubtedly because during the early 1950s his parents owned a boutique of Florentine artisanry at King Farouk's court.

"I still love to wander endlessly in Khartoum's Omdurman, Old Jerusalem's and Cairo's bazaars, searching for essences and spices. Cairo is the best place in the world to learn about perfume production," says Villoresi, who began his career concocting fragrances as a hobby for friends, then for Fendi, Armani and Trussardi. Now, although his products for the home and bath are sold at London's Fortnum & Mason, New York's Bergdorf Goodman, San Francisco's Gumps, Hong Kong's Lane Crawford, and, most recently, at Myer in Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth, and



Grace Bros in Sydney (to name a few), Villoresi prefers to create personalised or "signature" perfumes.

Starting at around \$US150, Villoresi's one-of-a-kind fragrances usually cost only a little bit more than a brand name, and the formula – a secret – remains exclusive to its wearer. Some essences, such as cinnamon, nutmeg, sandalwood oil and citrus flavors, are quite inexpensive. The most precious essences, and therefore perfumes made with them – amber and tonquin musk at \$US18,000 a kilogram or iris root at \$25,000 a kilogram – are more precious than gold.

Villoresi has counted among his 400 regular clients Jackie Onassis, Linda Evangelista and fashion designer Roberto Capucci. Most people come

Perfume passion: Lorenzo Villoresi in his attic laboratory-apartment; and below, the tools of his trade



alone and in one sitting choose summer, winter, morning and evening fragrances; only 5% come as couples, though everyone's goal is "sexual attraction".

"When Catherine de' Medici left Florence for France in the 1550s, and introduced the art of making perfumes to the French, the most popular fragrance was woodbine, a fragrant honeysuckle flower: every Florentine wore it," says Villoresi.

"During the Renaissance it was relatively easy to make a perfume. Now it's different. People want to distinguish themselves with a unique perfume – something designed not only as a personal statement but also as a mood enhancer."

Since 1989, Lorenzo Villoresi has dreamed up his scents in an attic with a breathtaking view of the Arno and Renaissance Florence.



The various stages of processing centifolia roses into perfume extraction: left, selection; below, heating; and bottom, pressing

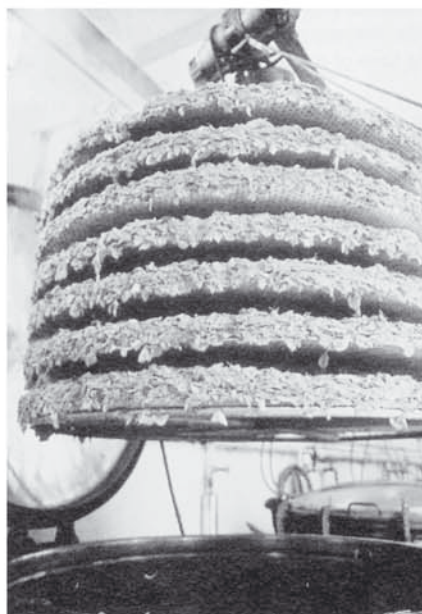
Surrounded by some 800 small colored bottles bearing such intriguing labels as "sea breeze", "freshly cut grass" and "damp hay", he begins by asking about his client's favorite smells. Then there is the sniffing session. "The power of smell is really incredible," he says. "Lots of memories and emotions can be evoked by a particular essence."

This complex olfactory psychoanalysis lasts an average of two to three hours and usually costs \$A200 to \$A250 including "your very own" perfume. The quantity of each essence is then recorded in a personal file, making re-orders simple.

"An emir [Muslim or Arabian prince] once asked me for a fragrance that evoked a horse at full gallop," he says. "However, the most unusual request I ever created was for an English lady who wanted to immortalise the scent of her beloved dog (that had recently died). I must have been successful because as soon as she left, all the stray dogs in the neighborhood started howling and following her down the street."

When creating a perfume, Villorresi usually blends 30 to 40 essences of the 100 or so sniffed. "Combining essences is like composing music," he says. "A perfume is created from different notes that take some time to play out. It is like a symphony, but I don't make your perfume. You use me to make the perfume you want. It is very personal and reflects who you are, who you think you are and who you would like to be. No other person does exactly what I do."

For an appointment at Via Bardi 14, Florence, phone 39 55 234 1187 or



fax 39 55 234 5893. In addition to custom fragrances, you can buy Villorresi's over-the-counter line of perfumes, potpourri, lotions and soaps, produced with fashion designer Giorgio Armani.

Before leaving Florence, another must for perfume lovers is the Farmacia di Santa Maria Novella, at Via della Scala 16r, phone 39 55 216 276. In this ethereal setting, Dominican fathers still produce perfume and other beauty products, including lotions for every skin type, according to their order's Renaissance formulas. See also Antica Farmacia de San Marco, at Via Cavour 146, phone 39 55 210 604. It was also founded in the 15th century, with its vaulted frescoed ceilings and rows of majolica jars. Its specifics include an anti-hysterical popular with English expatriate ladies during the 19th century.

Then, to learn still more about the history of perfume and its production, follow in the footsteps of a certain Renato Tombarelli, a Florentine chemist, like Bianco, in Catherine de' Medici's entourage. He settled in Grasse. Thanks in part to his initiative, this charming and peaceful town, nestled in the hills above Cannes on the French Riviera, has become the modern perfume capital of the world.

Nicknamed "the city of flowers", its omnipresent fragrances and blooms are celebrated twice a year: at the Rose Expo in the last week of May, and August's Jasmine Festival. For the rest of the year four of Grasse's 30 perfume factories offer hour-long guided tours, during which perfume-making techniques are explained. For a more in-depth study, visit the International Perfumery Museum (Place du Cours 8, phone 33 493 368 020).

Try also the nearby Fragonard Museum (Boulevard Fragonard 23, phone 33 493 360 161) and Molinard Museum (Boulevard Victor Hugo 60, phone 33 493 360 162). Fragonard is the elegant 17th-century country house of the famous court painter Jean-Honore Fragonard. The two museums offer two courses: "Studio Volatile" and "Studio Fixateur" to measure your aptitude for becoming "un nez" or a nose — an expert in the art of perfume analysis. ■