

A Perfume Devotee in the Land of French Fragrance

In and around Grasse, France, a confluence of soil, sun and temperature nurtures the roses, jasmine and other flowers that make this town a perfume capital.

Pursuits

By COLLEEN CREAMER AUG. 8, 2017

Before I became a perfume devotee a dozen years ago, my lexicon for describing scent was limited to words like “woody” or “flowery.” Later I found myself craving the dexterity of language that could match the increasingly complex perfumes arriving at my house in tiny decanted samples.

At the time, perfume blogs and a few books were lifting the veil off a closely guarded industry. I had fallen in love not only with perfume, but also with the deft and curious descriptions of fragrance at the hands of gifted perfume critics, namely Luca Turin and Tania Sanchez who together wrote the vastly entertaining “Perfumes: The A-Z Guide.” I felt as though I had discovered two new strains of art — not to mention the most underrated of the five senses.

More recently, I decided to take a deeper look into the fragrance industry and knew there was no better place to do this than Grasse, France, a medieval town in southern Provence known as the perfume capital of the world. In this medieval town and its environs, which are sufficiently inland to be sheltered from the sea air, a confluence of soil, sun and temperature nurtured the rose, jasmine, lavender, myrtle, wild mimosa and other flowers that were the genesis of the French perfume industry in the 17th century. Grasse is especially known for its fragrant May rose, the pale pink flower that blooms in May, and jasmine. Both

flowers are at the heart of more than a few famous fragrances, including Chanel's breathtaking star, No. 5.

The short version of Grasse's place in the history of perfume is one that begins with a foul odor. In medieval times, the town had a thriving leather business, but the tanning process made for pungent merchandise that didn't sit well with the gloved nobility. A Grasse tanner presented a pair of scented leather gloves to Catherine de Medici, the queen of France from 1547 until 1559, and an industry was born.

To this day, in and around Grasse, Dior, Hermès and Chanel all grow May roses and jasmine in protected flower fields. Every year the town exuberantly celebrates both of these fragrant blossoms with two festivals, and just this year Dior re-established the famous Château de la Colle Noire, Christian Dior's former residence in Grasse.

Many renowned "noses" (or perfumers) work and pull inspiration from Grasse. The town is so associated with perfume, its history and the skill involved in making it, that industry locals have applied for a place on Unesco's Intangible Cultural Heritage list, an inventory of traditions that rely on a wealth of transmittable knowledge that could be considered fragile in an increasingly globalized world.

Traveling alone and possessing only a rudimentary understanding of French, I set off for Grasse a few months ago, flying from Nashville to New York and on to Paris.

After 24 hours of flying and layovers, I crashed at a functional Paris hotel, submitted myself to a pastry crawl through the hotel's neighborhood, and then grabbed a cab to Gare de Lyon, one of the busiest train stations in Europe. On board the train to Cannes, I befriended a young family from Kolkata on their way to Nice and five hours later got a glimpse of yachts preening in Cannes harbor for the town's annual film festival. I boarded a local bus and headed up the hills to Grasse.

On the way, while being jostled by high schoolers, I noticed the ubiquitous signs pointing the way to the three big historic perfumeries in Grasse that offer tours, perfume workshops and fragrance products: Galimard, Molinard and Fragonard. Grasse is also home to the prestigious Grasse Institute of Perfumery,

which offers a number of levels of perfume-making instruction, including a nine-month immersion experience that accepts only 12 students a year.

The following morning I roamed through the city's winding cobblestone streets to get a taste of Old Grasse. In the temperate spring air, small colorful cafes, brasseries and shops blended with russet-hued villas that were embellished with every color in the Provençal palette. Gift shops selling pastel soaps, sachets and, of course, perfume lured window shoppers eager to pay for what Grasse does best: make things that smell good.

I made my way to Notre-Dame du Puy Grasse Cathedral. Once a simple church, it became Grasse's cathedral in 1244. The church's Romanesque design is modest in contrast to the highly decorative styles that came later. Inside, the cathedral is brooding and somber, more Dark Ages than medieval. It is home to three paintings by Peter Paul Rubens and one by Jean-Honoré Fragonard, Grasse's most famous artist and the namesake of one of the big fragrance houses, which was a relatively short hike from the church.

I reached Fragonard's multilevel ocher building — a parfait of shop, museum and working perfumery — and stood outside to catch my breath after the circuitous trek from the church. The building dates to 1782, though the perfumery was opened and named after the Grasse painter in 1926. While waiting for the next English-speaking tour, I wandered around Fragonard's unpretentious perfume museum and was reminded that although the origins of perfume stretch back to ancient civilization, France transformed its humble use into a luxury industry in the 18th century. When Louis XV was monarch from 1715 to 1774, he became known for his love of fragrance, and his court was celebrated as *la cour parfumée* (“the perfumed court”).

Finally, a small group of us gathered to start the tour, led by our young raconteur, Jessica.

We strolled through rooms with massive stainless steel vats, and others with staff members who were used to the intrusion. Jessica explained that after the jasmine, orange blossom, lavender and other flowers are scheduled to be picked, the blossoms are placed on trays in the upper part of a still over water that is brought to a boil. As the steam rises, it captures the scent-bearing components

and carries them into a glass cooler where the mixture of water and essential oils is then collected.

“We need three tons of flowers to get one liter of oil,” Jessica told us. This elicited an audible gasp from the gaggle of tourgoers who included a chatty man from Ireland, a few from Britain and me — the lone visitor from the United States.

We were one excited group of perfume lovers. Jessica tested us on which scents — lime, apple and lemon among them — we could recognize. Then I sneaked off to Fragonard’s little shop and purchased an orange blossom soap for my spare bathroom.

Perfumers in Grasse, along with those in the rest of the perfume world, have had to change with the times. Around the turn of the 20th century, a blast of new olfactory chemicals were discovered, though Grasse is known for natural botanical components.

From conversations with local perfume experts, I learned that flower production has been scaled back. Much of the land has simply become too expensive for farming.

Still, Grasse’s influence and relevance in the fragrance industry remains almost unmatched based on its history, the growers’ quality and the creative gifts of the perfumers who live here.

Grasse may have a viable bus system, but after the ride from Cannes, I had little interest in mass transit, so I rented a tiny Fiat that proved useful in managing traffic on streets barely designed for people, much less vehicles. Roundabouts in France are fast, competitive, lawless and fun — if you have a death wish.

That evening, after I returned to my Airbnb rental, my host told me that she and her husband were both chemical engineers, and that he is in the perfume industry. She added that he “hates to talk shop at home.” I internally swore to honor that request; for \$37 a night, I was getting a comfortable room, a great breakfast and a view over Grasse’s rolling slopes of terra cotta rooftops, and I was already planning my return.

The following morning, I drove to the Musée International de la Parfumerie (International Perfume Museum), in the heart of the old city. The museum is a marvelous combination of vintage and new, housed in an 18th-century mansion that has been expanded with an eye toward the contemporary. It traces 3,000 years of perfume history, from ancient Greece through modernity, with artifacts, videos, olfactory installations and explanatory panels.

The museum's plant conservatory is roughly five miles southwest of Grasse on the edge of the village of Mouans-Sartoux (see the Castle of Mouans if time permits). At nearly five acres, the gardens complement the museum's mission by giving visitors a chance to smell and touch many of the botanical ingredients involved in perfumery.

Grasse has a dedicated bus to the gardens. Several large areas focus on how roses, jasmine and lavender are grown regionally; another area is cataloged by olfactory families: floral, fruity, etc.

For travelers who want to match one of their favorite perfume ingredients with its source, this place should be on the itinerary. Pack a lunch — there are a number of places to picnic — or just sit and breathe in the fragrant gardens.

The next morning at Café des Musées, a contemporary café near Fragonard, I met with Jessica Buchanan. I had found Ms. Buchanan's boutique perfume line, 1000 Flowers, online last year. When I discovered that she lived in Grasse, I reached out.

Ms. Buchanan offers personalized perfume creation and consulting services as well as her own fragrances. In 2007, she sold her house in western Canada to study at the Grasse Institute of Perfumery.

At one time, she said, there were many small perfumers in Grasse, but their number had dwindled over the years, though they were slowly coming back. Still, only a handful of small perfumers currently work out of Grasse. Ms. Buchanan, who is preparing to open a boutique this fall in the old section of the town, said that growers and perfumers here consider themselves a family.

"There are quite a lot of perfumers here, and then there are the big rock-star perfumers associated with the big brands, but we are all part of this community," Ms. Buchanan said. "There are perfumers you would never know who work in the

big companies and who work on functional products. Their work is just as important as that of big-name perfumers; it's just different.”

The rock stars Ms. Buchanan refers to may be Hermès's recently retired perfumer Jean-Claude Ellena and Louis Vuitton's Jacques Cavallier. François Demachy, formerly of Chanel and now with Dior, has lived in Grasse most of his life. These master perfumers, and other creative individuals in the region, bring cachet to Grasse because they are the artistic geniuses behind the engine of the fragrance industry.

Ms. Buchanan volunteers with the Association du Patrimoine Vivant du Pays de Grasse (Living Heritage of the Region of Grasse), the nonprofit organization that is presenting the application for Unesco's Intangible Cultural Heritage list. While I was there, she, among a number of other industry players, met with Unesco ambassadors from various countries to help them determine the scale and scope of Grasse's perfume industry. The association expects a response from Unesco next year.

“There will be groups of them coming all through the year,” she said. “They visited the Chanel rose fields. They went to see Château de la Colle Noire. They went to the perfumery school. It's a hugely complex undertaking. They look at everything from the plant growers and their knowledge base to the harvesters, all the way to the extraction in the factories to the perfumers.”

Grasse's flower-growing industry could be vulnerable not only to stiff competition, Ms. Buchanan said, but also to development.

“There is a lot at risk of being lost,” she said.

At the same time, Grasse is benefiting from the worldwide organic movement that is helping revive the demand for product from the region's small-scale flower producers. Les Fleurs d'Exception du Pays de Grasse, a consortium of organic flower growers formed in 2008, produces around 40 acres of perfume plants for large companies — rose, jasmine, iris, tuberose, orange blossom, violet, Madonna lily and *Iris pallida*, along with mimosa, narcissus, broom and lavender.

After Ms. Buchanan and I said goodbye, I set out for Molinard, one of the most beautiful old perfumeries in Grasse. It was established in 1849, when the company produced and sold floral waters in a small shop in Grasse's center. The

interior blends natural light from skylights with illumination from chandeliers to a royal effect — fitting since Molinard’s color theme is threaded with purple. Like Fragonard and Galimard, Molinard offers free tours in a number of languages, as well as individual and group workshops.

I was greeted by a raven-haired receptionist who told me a little more about the history of Molinard, which reminded me of my small bottle of Nirmala, an unusual fragrance the company introduced in 1955.

I peeked around a corner at a perfume workshop and realized I was a day away from my own. I knew I wanted to have my own fragrance blended while in Grasse. I had chosen Galimard, the oldest perfumery in Grasse and certainly one of the oldest perfumeries in the world. It dates to 1747 when Jean de Galimard supplied the French court with olive oils, pomades and perfumes. Bespoke fragrances involve a considerable amount of time and deliberation, so realistically, I understood I wasn’t going to get something spectacular with zero skills; I just wanted to have some fun.

While in Galimard’s store the following day, waiting for the workshop to begin, I inhaled what the perfume house had to sell — single fragrances, home scents and other fragrance-related items — until the friendly woman attending the counter tapped her nose: a gentle suggestion that I stop. She was aware that I was in the next group of budding perfumers and she wanted my olfactory facility unconfused.

Later, our small group was seated at individual “perfume organs” — half circles of small bottles of essential oils and an empty 100-milliliter glass beaker. I felt a twinge of acute uncertainty. I knew what I liked but had no idea what fusion of chemicals would deliver it. One day I adore a coy floral, the next day something that is hedonic and overt.

Our chic facilitator, Manon, explained the functions of the top note, the heart note (the dominant character) and the base note, the three stages of a perfume’s scent across time. With a little guidance, she helped us establish a rough estimate of what we desired. Beside me, twin girls were fulfilling a birthday wish.

Direction was offered during the measuring, testing and smelling. Manon kept an eye out for potential epic fails that occur when using too much of this or that. Two hours later, after I made what seemed like life-threatening decisions,

“Lark” was born, and it was far better than I had any right to imagine, at once light and dark (a few of the notes included lotus, bergamot, bois de santal, gardenia, bamboo and sandalwood).

“Very feminine!” Manon said to me after she dipped a white fragrance strip in my new perfume. I immediately wanted to know more about this stylish, kind woman who had just unwittingly made me aware that I was wearing pedal pushers and Crocs.

On the train ride back to Paris, I hung out with two young Australians, friends who were on holiday through Europe and who smelled lemony clean and crisp — like youth and freedom.

The sense of smell has a deep drawer and a quick retrieval system. Now, when I wear my almost-homemade fragrance, I am transported back to the time when I was in a lovely French town with equally lovely inhabitants who, even though I mangled their language and complained about their traffic laws, let me sit at their table while they discussed this magical thing called alchemy.

IF YOU GO

Fragonard Historic Factory (20 Boulevard Fragonard; fragonard.com/en/factories/historic-factory), which is in one of Grasse’s oldest factories, offers free tours, a product line and group and individual perfume workshops by reservation.

International Perfume Museum (2 Boulevard du Jeu de Ballon; www.museesdegrasse.com/en) is one of the most complete museums regarding perfume in the world, tracing its history from ancient civilization to modernity. Admission is 4 euros, or about \$4.75.

International Perfume Museum Gardens (979 Chemin des Gourettes, Mouans-Sartoux; www.museesdegrasse.com/en/presentation-gardens) is the International Perfume Museum’s plant conservatory. It includes plant tutorials and five acres of plants used in making perfume. Admission is 4 euros, or 2 euros if you have a ticket to the museum.

Molinarid Mansion (60 Boulevard Victor Hugo; molinarid.com/en/content/14-the-visit) displays artifacts and gives a glimpse into

the daily operations of the fragrance house, which dates back to 1879. It offers a product line, free tours, and individual and group perfume workshops by reservation.

1000 Flowers (1000flowers.ca) is an online perfumery based in Grasse, owned by the perfumer Jessica Buchanan. It offers fragrances and personalized fragrance creation, and is expected to have a brick-and-mortar presence in Grasse in the coming months.

Galimard Factory & Museum (73 Route de Cannes; galimard.com/index.php/en/visite-grasse/particuliers-a-groupes.html) offers fragrance products, free tours of the oldest perfumery in Grasse, and individual and group perfume workshops by reservation.

Colleen Creamer is a Nashville-based freelance writer.

A version of this article appears in print on August 13, 2017, on Page TR1 of the New York edition with the headline: In the Land of French Fragrance.