

# Conversations: Laurie Erickson of Sonoma Scent Studio

Written by Ashne

TUESDAY, 09 OCTOBER 2007

Laurie Erickson is a self-taught perfumer and founder of niche perfumery Sonoma Scent Studio, set in the beautiful rolling hills of California's wine region. Sonoma Scent Studio was formally established in 2004, and all Laurie's perfumes are hand blended, using the finest quality ingredients from around the world. One of Laurie's top priorities is giving excellent customer service and helping clients find the perfect perfume.

*"Spending time on the local wooded trails as I was growing up gave me a life-long appreciation for our natural environment as well as a stockpile of pleasant natural scent memories and associations. I enjoyed many warm afternoons in the shade of the oaks, redwoods, and bay trees, savoring their scents mingled with the scents of moist earth by the creek and dry dust on the trail. I think scent is intimately connected to our memory and moods and can add much pleasure to our lives." --Laurie*

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**Ashne:** When did you become interested in perfume and what was the first perfume you ever wore?

**Laurie:** The first one I wore was a violet scent a friend gave me in grade school, I didn't wear it much, but mostly just sniffed the bottle. The first scent I fell in love with was Chanel No. 22 in college. When I was young I loved the fragrant roses, jasmine, and sweet peas in my Mom's and grandmother's gardens, and I've been growing fragrant plants ever since that early introduction. I began blending natural essential oils as a way to have the scent of jasmine and rose even when the plants were out of bloom.

**Ashne:** So did Sonoma Scent Studio get started due to your love of flowers and the desire to preserve their fragrance - can you tell us the story of what led you to start your own perfumery?

**Laurie:** Yes, exactly. I tried scents from department stores and had a hard time finding realistic floral smells, though I did find some scents I liked. When I discovered the niche and boutique market I fell in love with a few scents in many different lines, such as Serge Lutens, Caron (especially some of the urn parfums), L'Artisan, Guerlain, and Rosine. I had only worked with naturals at first, so I wanted to learn about the synthetic ingredients in these boutique scents. I started researching aroma chemicals and learned how to work with them. After I got into this more deeply I thought I'd try starting a business with it and see where it led.

**Ashne:** How do you feel about using natural versus synthetics in perfume? Is there really a difference between using organics and scents created in a laboratory?

**Laurie:** I really understand why some people want all natural perfumes and some don't. Naturals are beautiful and complex, and they add a very special touch to blends. They also tend to be shorter lived on the skin (especially floral and citrus notes). I prefer to use both; I use a much higher level of naturals than most non-niche brands, and I use synthetics to add lift and longevity. I choose my synthetics carefully though. I avoid many common aroma chemicals because they smell too synthetic to me; I don't like ozone notes, for example.

**Ashne:** I agree with you - I find that many 100% organic fragrances don't last on my skin or in the bottle, and they turn fairly quickly.

**Laurie:** I do think organics add a tremendous amount of beauty to fragrances though. There's nothing like real oakmoss and real floral absolutes!

**Ashne:** Can you explain the difference between an Absolute and an Essential oil for our readers?

**Laurie:** An EO is a steam distilled or cold-pressed volatile oil whereas an absolute is extracted using a solvent in a several step process that involves a concrete. The absolutes are more concentrated and more expensive. Floral essences like jasmine are made into absolutes because EO extraction methods don't work to capture their scent -- you need to use what works best for each scent source.

**Ashne:** So perfumery is both an art and a science!

**Laurie:** Yes!

**Ashne:** Do you distill your own essences (tinctures), and could you briefly explain the process for our readers?

**Laurie:** I do make alcohol tinctures with teas, ambrette seeds, tonka bean, vanilla bean, orris root, etc. I've not been successful with flowers yet though. I just put the material into a glass container with added perfumer's alcohol and let it sit, shaking periodically. I did get a nice star jasmine tincture this year, but it doesn't last long enough on the skin. To get a good floral tincture you need to change the flowers out many times to concentrate the floral essence enough. I'm going to try again next year and do more than the three flower changes I did this year.

**Ashne:** It sounds absolutely fascinating, which brings me to my next question: what is the strangest/most unusual thing you've ever tried to distill? I recall a natural perfumer telling me she once tinctured the hair of a billy goat, and it gave me a good laugh, as billy goats are quite smelly animals!

**Laurie:** I haven't gotten too strange yet! My attempt to tincture sweet pea smelled pretty strange though!

**Ashne:** Where do you get your ideas and inspiration to create a new fragrance?

**Laurie:** Inspiration for specific scents may come from a new oil ingredient that I source, or from a scent combination I've always wanted to try, or from a scent memory, or from a client request. Inspiration on a more general level comes daily from our beautiful natural environment. I'm so lucky to have the gorgeous oak trees and rolling hills of California around me every day. I also have a little cottage garden full of flowers and the scents are a great inspiration and source of pleasure.

**Ashne:** It sounds beautiful. Is Sonoma Scent Studio open for tours by appointment and do you see yourself conducting a perfume workshop for those who'd like to learn more?

**Laurie:** Not yet, but I do hope to have open studio hours here at some point in the future. I've done scent one-on-one sessions with friends and it's fun to see what essences they like best and then put together a scent based on their personal preference. I haven't done that much yet, but would like to do it more when I get my collection of ingredients better set up for that sort of interactive session.

**Ashne:** What distinguishes Sonoma Scent Studio from other independent perfumeries?

**Laurie:** I'm still quite small and each scent is freshly made in small batches and sometimes customized to taste for people. I'm trying to produce scents that aren't found elsewhere, narrowing my scent list to the ones that are most special to me. I use a lot of naturals, but combine with carefully selected synthetics to get the best of both worlds. Other small perfumers are doing this too, but we each bring our own unique style to our scents.

**Ashne:** In my opinion, your Fireside perfume is one of the best interpretations of wood smoke and a blazing fireplace I have ever smelled. It's an authentic, incredible smelling perfume that somehow smells more complete than other fragrances that try to capture wood smoke and fire, like Annick Goutal Eau de Fier and John Galliano's room spray. Sonoma Scent Studio Fireside is a beauty. Do you think you'll make a matching scented candle for Fireside in the future?

**Laurie:** Thank you so much! Candle making is another art and I've read a little bit about how you need to adjust your ingredients to work in candle wax applications, I suspect a lot of the naturals I use in Fireside might be difficult in candles, but I'd have to look into it. That scent would certainly be fun in candle or room scent form though!

**Ashne:** Which fragrance is your best seller and which one is your personal favorite?

**Laurie:** Some best sellers have been Opal, Bois Epices, Ambre et Encens, and the new Champagne de Bois is doing well, though it just came out. I think my personal favorite is the new updated Jour Ensoleille. I've been enjoying Champagne and the

new Rose Musc too.

**Ashne:** I'm curious; do fragrances have visual images and sounds for you when you create a new one? For example, when I wear Serge Lutens Iris Silver Mist, I 'see' it as an indigo perfume, and the music I associate with it is Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata. What are your thoughts on this?

**Laurie:** I do associate colors with scents, but not music so much. For me they bring up associations with colors, moods, and sometimes seasons. Jour Ensoleille makes me think of late summer when the weather is warm in the afternoon, but the evenings are getting cooler and days are getting shorter. I guess I associate things with nature a lot. That's just a part of me.

**Ashne:** Do you have a favorite theme - like woods/incense/fruits/florals?

**Laurie:** I enjoy many different kinds of fragrances — floral, oriental, woody, and incense are all favorites.

**Ashne:** Whom would you consider the greatest master perfumer, and what is your Holy Grail fragrance? (You can only choose one!)

**Laurie:** I can't pick just one "master perfumer," but I can say the two who have made the largest numbers of scents I love are Christopher Sheldrake and Jean Claude Ellena. You know it's impossible for me to pick just one perfume! I think No. 22 suits my personality very well, so I'll go with it, but a top 10 list would be easier!

**Ashne:** I know it's hard, but I'd thought I'd throw it out there anyway!

**Laurie:** What's your #1?

**Ashne:** People of the Labyrinths Luctor et Emergo and Iris Silver Mist. I can't pick just one either!

As a self-taught perfumer, what one piece of advice would you give to a student of perfume who wants to create their own fragrances?

**Laurie:** That's a great question. I think it helps to sniff all the perfumes out there that you can and then sniff all the ingredients you can, both naturals and synthetics. Learn your materials before you try to do too much. Start in very tiny batches and dilute your naturals to 10% or sometimes less depending on their strength. Read as much as you can. Expect to do many trials with various combinations. Also, buy a good scale that can weigh down to 0.01 grams; it'll make your job much easier when working with small batches. And have fun! Oops, that was more than one piece of advice!

**Ashne:** That's awesome advice, Laurie!

Last question - do you create bespoke (custom private blends) for your clients?

**Laurie:** Yes, I've done that before and would like to get back to some custom blending as soon as I finish the new scents I'm working on now. Making custom fragrances is very time-consuming but very rewarding too.

**Ashne:** I would imagine there's so much work involved, but also tremendous satisfaction. There is something so special about having a fragrance made that is only created for you - that nobody else has! It's very personal.

Laurie, thank you so much for making the time for this interview. I look forward to trying some of your new fragrance soon, and I hope that Sonoma Scent Studio continues to prosper in the future!

**Laurie:** Thank you too! It was fun doing the interview!

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Ashne has her own IT company, and lives in the Pacific Northwest with her husband and three cats. Ashne's love of fragrance developed during her years of travel, and she is a regular perfume reviewer on [makeupalley.com](http://makeupalley.com). Ashne's favorite aromas include incense, woods, honey and iris root. She may be contacted at [Ashne at [perfumecritic dot com](mailto:perfumecritic.com)].

