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## Something in the Air

### Uncommon Scents

By Denise Hamilton

## **These days, real men wear fragrance—to the delight of their friends and lovers**



NOLA LOPEZ

My first crush in high school wore Aramis, and all these years later, this leathery oakmoss-and-citrus fragrance by Bernard Chant can plunge me into the melancholy of adolescence. Back then, Jovan, Brut and Hai Karate ruled the San Fernando Valley, but boys weren't interested in the nuances of fragrance. For American men, scent was not a manly pursuit.

Oh, how times have changed. Today's guys have a wider array of fragrances to choose from than ever before, and with the word metrosexual ensconced in our vocabulary, it has become normal for men to embrace and explore scent with an enthusiasm once reserved for the ladies.

Almost half of today's men buy their own fragrances, which has nudged retail sales of male scents toward \$1.8 billion annually at a time when women's sales have fallen to \$4 billion.

A few interesting factoids: Celebrity and designer scents dominate both men's and women's markets, with Calvin Klein outselling all. Acqua di Gio is the top men's seller in high-end department stores, according to industry analyst John Deputato at Symphony IRI Group, and Stetson is most popular in mass-market outlets.

But recent years have also seen a proliferation of artisanal perfumers like By Killian, Parfum d'Empire, Ormonde Jayne and Parfumerie Générale. As a result, stores like Barneys New York, Saks Fifth Avenue, Neiman Marcus and Fred Segal have expanded into cutting-edge fragrances for men who don't want to smell like Cool Water clones.

Franco Wright is cofounder of Scent Bar in West Hollywood, a tiny space crammed with rare, imported and unusual scents for the discriminating nose. When he opened five years ago, his clientele was 10 percent male. Today, it's more than 30 percent—and their tastes are eclectic.

“We do very well with traditional ‘English gentleman’ colognes,” Wright says, “but we’ve seen a lot of men gravitate toward incense, tobacco and oud. Rose is big, too, because you can make it dirty, woody and spicy.”

His bestsellers for guys: Escentric Molecule 01, a radiant scent with touches of wood, incense and amber that smells shower clean; Andy Tauer’s L’Air du Désert Marocain, with amber, smoke and frankincense; Avignon and Kyoto, from Comme des Garçons’ incense line; and Endymion, a classic spice-and-wood Penhaligon’s cologne that older customers favor and younger ones are discovering.

“We get stockbrokers, doctors, artists, musicians, movie executives,” Wright says. “They’re the customers who are into wine. They appreciate the craft. They’re usually creative, and they’re fascinated by scent.

Recently, I bellied up to the Scent Bar to sample a flight of men’s fragrances. First up were several from Francis Kurkdjian, one of the most talented noses in indie perfumery today. His Lumière Noire Homme has dark, rich notes of spicy orange and rose, while Absolue Pour le Soir is an intense blend of honeyed tobacco, boozy rose and leather.

Wright has had strong preorders for Penhaligon’s Sartorial, a mix of lavender, wool and dust that calls to mind Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited*. For the more edgy English gentleman, there is Czech & Speake, whose Cuba (think 1950s Havana nightclub), Dark Rose (dirty, boozy rose and oud) and No. 88 (bergamot, geranium, vetiver and sandalwood) are retro-modern classics.

The most transgressive men’s fragrance I sniffed was Black Afgano by Nasomatto, said to include distilled hashish. Raspy and tarry, tempered with silky notes of oud, patchouli, cherry tobacco and leather, Black Afgano is produced in small batches. Scent Bar has a waiting list “20 miles long” for it, because the 180 bottles allocated for Wright this year were snapped up immediately.

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Leather saddles, club chairs and handtooled cowboy boots are what I smell in the spicy amber leather of Mona di Orio’s brand-new Les Nombres d’Or Cuir.

Hold that thought, and stroll outside where the pit barbecue is smoking, and you’re detecting Andy Tauer’s whimsical Lonestar Memories. If perfume were poetry, Tauer would be this generation’s Auden.

Wait, now it’s late, and we’re under the stars. The aromatic logs have burned to embers, and we’re in the world of Fireside Intense, Incense Pure and Winter Woods from Laurie Erickson’s artisanal perfumery Sonoma Scent Studio up north.

Moving toward the ocean, Profumum’s Acqua di Sale has a salty marine note I love to smell on a man. Think of sipping a glass of crisp Grüner Veltliner while sitting on a driftwood log at Big Sur’s most remote beach, and you get the idea.

So, what's the manliest scent at Scent Bar? Tabacco, by the Italian firm Odori, which blends Paul Bunyan-size notes of hay, tobacco and honey. The genie in this bottle is the biggest, most muscular bearded lumberjack in the forest.

If your man skews more toward Johnny Rotten, there's always Sex Pistols, a new fragrance by the quirky État Libre d'Orange, which promises to bring out your inner punk but strikes this former Starwood habituée as more of a peppery citrus aquatic.

État Libre d'Orange may be French, but the postmodern punsters here are light-years from the gravitas of Guerlain and Coty. Consider their Fat Electrician, a peaty-vetiver scent whose artwork shows a pair of buttocks emerging from saggy trousers. Even if it stunk, I'd covet the bottle.

Many new boutique fragrances are unisex, which actually reflects historic views. In Victorian times, men's colognes wafted of lavender, rose and violet. Guerlain's Jicky, created in 1889, is a lavender-vanilla Fougère—quite the masculine genre— with herbs that work on both sexes.

L'Artisan's Timbuktu by Bertrand Duchaufour goes both ways as well but is popular with men for its sheer notes of sandalwood, incense, vetiver and wood. Another of my favorite crossovers is Chanel Sycomore, a smoky-incense vetiver in the company's Les Exclusifs line.

Plenty of department-store men's classics are still around and still smell fantastic: Dior Eau Sauvage, Guerlain Vetiver, Chanel's Pour Monsieur and Égoïste, Ralph Lauren Polo, Givenchy Gentleman—and, of course, Aramis and its brethren Aramis 900, Tuscany and Havana, all intoxicating with spice, smoke, rum, tobacco, vanilla and wood.

The men's classic that generates the most hysteria is Yves Saint Laurent's bestselling Kouros, whose white bottle evokes classical Greece. The notes outrage some, who liken it to locker-room sweat, urinal cake, semen, cat feces and dead rodents. My personal favorite, from an ambivalent Basenotes review: "This smells like Bigfoot's dick; in a (very) good way!!!" Kouros fans, however, find it elegant, manly and classic. See for yourself—but easy on the trigger, pardner.

And what do male perfume critics wear? Luca Turin, the Jonathan Gold of the scents world, confessed in *Perfumes: The A-Z Guide* that for an entire decade he wore the fragrance New York, created by third-generation perfumer Patricia de Nicolai. (Her grandfather was Pierre Guerlain, and the firm is Parfums Nicolai.) New York's finely blended, crisp yet refined accord of orange, vanilla and wood might be a safe, elegant initial bet for the man wanting to dip his toe into this fragrant new world.