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Small-batch, big-passion scent

Creator of Ellie took first sniffs in Villanova.

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CHICAGO - When Jessica Dunne created her perfume Ellie, she didn't want it to be overpowered by sweet florals or celebrity status. There would be no Britney Spears fanfare for the launch of this parfum.

So Dunne, 32, entered the already cluttered fragrance market as a niche perfumer. And while the Ellie scent hasn't yet ingrained itself into our memories like Chanel No. 5, the Villanova-bred mother of two has managed to get the attention of important haute noses.

"This fragrance is beautiful," said Claudia Lucas, senior vice president for beauty at Henri Bendel. "She's managed to come up with a fragrance that's quite delightful."

Ellie Parfum, an elegant tribute to Dunne's paternal grandmother, Eleanor Dunne, is sold at Bendel's in New York as well as Fred Segal in L.A. and London's Harrods. Dunne is looking to find a boutique in Philadelphia to exclusively sell the line, but the scent is also available at www.luckyscent.com.

In late June, Dunne released an evening version of the bold yet musky fragrance, appropriately called Ellie Nuit.

"I used to love to watch my grandmother put on her perfume," she said. "She'd blot a little dab behind her ears. It was such a classy ritual."

Niche perfumes such as Jo Malone, Bond No. 9 and Creed are these days like M.A.C and Bobbi Brown were to the makeup industry in the early '90s. The same way these makeup lines irreverently experimented with pigments, perfumers behind niche scents infuse the unexpected into their pungent concoctions.

In the case of Ellie, Dunne saw to it that vetiver - a common scent in men's cologne - was added to musk, lily of the valley, rose and gardenia notes.

But the true definition of a niche fragrance is based on its availability, said Karen Grant, vice president and global industry analyst at NPD Market Group.

Most prestige fragrances are launched in a minimum of 2,000 stores. Niche fragrances are distributed in a fraction of places, ranging from a couple of dozen to fewer than 1,000.



ELIZABETH WELLINGTON / Inquirer Staff

"I used to love to watch my grandmother put on her perfume," says Dunne. "She'd blot a little dab behind her ears. It was such a classy ritual." She's sold about 300 bottles of Ellie, \$180 each.



While niche fragrances debut in fewer outlets, more of them have been cropping up over the years. National sales of "prestige" fragrances - those sold at department stores and Sephora - have fallen from \$2.96 billion in 2004 to \$2.94 billion in 2007, according to NPD. However, sales of niche prestige fragrances grew from 4 percent of the luxury fragrance market, or \$119 million, in 2004 to 9 percent of the market, or \$253 million, in 2007.

"These fragrances are more than doubling in volume while the market is declining," Grant said. "They are doing a good job at attracting the trendsetter customer who is looking to try out different things."

In the last 10 years, fragrances like Annick Goutal and Frederic Malle got hefty boosts from perfume blogs such as Luckyscent, Nowsmellthis and Shakeyourbeauty.

Ellie was profiled last year in Sniffapalooza's on-line magazine. Sniffapalooza is an international event-based organization for serious sniffers. The Web site, www.Sniffapalooza.com, boasts an average of 20,000 hits a day. This month Ellie Nuit was featured in Lucky Magazine as well.

"There is a real passionate person out there who buys a lot of fragrances and knows when everything is out before it actually comes out," said Karen Dubin, the native Philadelphian behind Sniffapalooza.

"You can compare the intense interest to wine lovers."

Exuding the same class as an aged spirit, Dunne is a modern-day version of yesterday. Think *Sex and the City's* Charlotte. Her blond hair is ultra-straight, and she is as dainty and precise as the French dots that cover her half-ounce bottle.

At first dab, Ellie is barely noticeable. But within seconds, the notes grow bold as it mixes with a person's pheromones. On a late summer afternoon, the scent caught the attention of Jill Ostrow, who was enjoying a snack at a Chicago cafe. "I have an overly sensitive nose, and I don't like most scents," Ostrow said before taking Dunne's card. "But this I really like. It's light. It smells fresh. It's like it belongs on me."

Dunne has been mixing scents to create perfumes - some watered down, some electric - from a young age. As a child, she sold her aromatic concoctions - often already-made perfumes mixed with flowers - with her friends and sister at a lemonade stand.

She majored in psychology with a concentration in neuroscience at Haverford College. After a brief stint in banking and a master's degree in liberal arts with a concentration in art history, Dunne worked at Christie's before finding a job at Berry-Hill Galleries.

In 2005, Dunne decided to research what it would take to make her own perfume. She sent an e-mail to Michel Roudnitska in Grasse, France, one of the select perfumers behind the spicy niche fragrance Frederic Malle. Roudnitska comes from a long family of perfumers; his father, Edmond Roudnitska, created Christian Dior's Eau Savage.

Roudnitska, who said he receives at least one e-mail per week from someone who wants to collaborate with him, said he decided to work with Dunne because he sensed her passion.

"She had a very precise idea about the notes in her perfume," Roudnitska wrote in an e-mail from his home in Grasse. "The fragrance she asked me to make was in a completely different range of my usual creations."

In the beginning, Roudnitska sent the samples to Dunne's New York home for her to test. In 2006, Dunne's husband took a job in London, enabling her to travel to France more frequently for sniffings.

After Roudnitska came up with the scent, he mailed the concentrate to a New York-based filler warehouse where alcohol is added and the scent is packaged.

There are about 2,000 bottles each of Ellie and Ellie Nuit on the market. So far, Dunne said, she has sold about 300 bottles of Ellie. Both scents sell for \$180 each. Her initial investment was \$100,000.

"I always wanted to do something on my own, but I didn't believe that this passion would become a business," Dunne said.