

The New York Times

SKIN DEEP

An Underdog Pursues the Scent

By NATASHA SINGER

Published: August 20, 2008

WHEN a major beauty or fashion company wants to create a blockbuster fragrance, it might spend \$10 million to \$20 million on expenses: hiring a master perfumer to produce several dozen variations of a scent; testing the iterations on focus groups; concocting an exotic back story for the press; introducing the scent with saturation advertising and marketing; and stocking it on shelves in 2,000 stores nationwide.

SIGN IN TO E-MAIL
OR SAVE THIS

PRINT

REPRINTS

SHARE

ARTICLE TOOLS
SPONSORED BY

NOTORIOUS
in theaters 09



Kelly Shimoda for The New York Times

SMELL OF SUCCESS For Jessica Dunne, Ellie is a dream come true.

Related

[A Fragrance to Call Your Own](#)
(August 21, 2008)

[Times Topics: Perfumes and
Fragrances](#)

[Enlarge This Image](#)

Jessica Dunne, 32, spent about \$100,000 of her own hard-earned savings over the last three years to develop Ellie, her first perfume. In June, she introduced her second fragrance.

Ms. Dunne, who lives in Chicago with her husband and young daughter, had no connections to the beauty industry when she began her quest in 2005 to create a perfume in honor of her grandmother Eleanor.

But she did have determination and a dream.

She sought out Michel Roudnitska, a perfumer who lives in France, to be her collaborator. Her family in her hometown of Villanova, Pa., served as her focus group. A friend volunteered to tie by hand the grosgrain ribbon bow that decorates each package. Then Ms. Dunne cold-called Claudia Lucas, the perfume buyer at Henri Bendel in Manhattan, and asked whether she could send a sample of the perfume.

Bendel is renowned in the fashion industry for its semiannual event called Open See in which unknown fashion designers present their wares. Ms. Lucas occasionally extends a similar welcome to would-be perfumers. She bought Ellie.

Last week in an interview at the store, Ms. Lucas recalled that she had immediately liked the scent itself, a quaint floral heavy on lily of the valley. But the buyer also had a hunch that her clients would respond to the brand story: an authentically sweet tale of a young woman who dreamed of creating a fragrance based on her olfactory



Photographs by Kelly Shimoda for The New York Times

FINDING A NICHE Jessica Dunne, who spent about \$100,000 on Ellie, in front of Henri Bendel.

memories of perfumes worn by her grandmother.

“A brand is always a story well told,” Ms. Lucas, the vice president and general merchandise manager for beauty at Bendel, said as she gave a reporter a tour of the boutique’s perfume bar. In the company of more-established niche fragrances like Annick Goutal and L’Artisan Parfumeur, the slim glass flagon containing Ellie stood out like a modestly dressed ingénue at a black tie gala.

Indeed, even among such rarefied fragrances, the advent of a one-woman do-it-yourself fragrance house that has already sold several hundred \$180 bottles of perfume is an unlikely success story. Ms. Dunne’s trajectory from Villanova to the shelves of one of America’s most discerning perfume counters is a tale of pluck, luck, word of mouth and exquisite timing.

Fortuitously for Ellie, it plays into two recent beauty trends: consumers looking for niche products their friends don’t have; and scent nostalgia, the fragrance equivalent of comfort food.

“Women are gravitating toward fragrances that have a nostalgic feel, that have a bit more comfort,” said Karen Grant, the senior beauty analyst at the NPD Group, a market research firm that tracks cosmetics sales. “In unstable times, people go back to things that are more familiar.”

Ms. Dunne, a slim blonde with ballerina-like bearing, met a reporter last week to recount the story of Ellie. Sitting on a white tufted-leather banquette in the Chocolate Bar on Bendel’s third floor, she said her interest in fragrance originated in her childhood.

When the other neighborhood children set up a lemonade stand, Ms. Dunne sold homemade perfume made out of mashed-up honeysuckle, berries and other flowers, she said. And while others collected dolls, Ms. Dunne amassed a modest collection of vintage perfume bottles.

From her monogrammed Goyard tote, Ms. Dunne extracted some of the tiny bottles of her collection, carefully unwound them from bubble wrap and arranged them on a cafe table: a quartet of vintage Avon scents including one with the name Cotillion; a set of tiny handblown Venetian glass beakers collected on a college tour of Europe.

“My earliest memories were of sitting on a bed watching my mother get dressed,” Ms. Dunne said. She especially liked how her mother used the perfume stopper to dot perfume behind her ears and on her wrists.

Ms. Dunne had a peripatetic early career: working as a sales assistant on a trading desk at Credit Suisse First Boston, doing graduate work in art history and managing an art gallery in Manhattan that had been in the same family for four generations. That kind of independent family ownership inspired her to start thinking about her own project.

She resolved to create a perfume, a soft ladylike scent that would remind her of her grandmother’s dressing table, laden with bottles of Joy, Shalimar, and Chanel No. 5.

First, Ms. Dunne schooled herself in fragrance by sniffing every perfume in department stores.

Then, she tracked down www.art-et-parfum.com, the Web site of Mr. Roudnitska, a perfumer who runs a fragrance laboratory in the vertiginous hills of Cabris, a French village near Grasse, the world’s perfume capital. This is the same lab in which Mr. Roudnitska’s father, the master perfumer Edmond Roudnitska, produced some of the

grand Dior classics of the 20th century, including Diorissimo and Eau Sauvage. His son designed a scent for Frédéric Malle, the French perfume impresario.

Ms. Dunne sent an e-mail message to Mr. Roudnitska.

“I wrote: ‘Hello, I am a young woman in New York. I don’t have a background in fragrance, but I have an idea,’ ” she said.

Mr. Roudnitska, who receives dozens of such requests annually, usually tries to dissuade amateurs with Dior dreams. He discourages them by explaining the time commitment required of such a collaboration, as well as the cost, he said.

“But she accepted all of the conditions which discourage 99 percent of the others,” Mr. Roudnitska said last week in a phone interview. “She was determined.”

In August 2005, Ms. Dunne traveled to Cabris, where Mr. Roudnitska presented dozens of vials, each containing a single note, and had her smell them, as well as some partly finished fragrances on which he had already worked. The perfumer, who prefers spicier juices in his own creations, said it was a challenge for him to incarnate Ms. Dunne’s paradoxical vision: a scent at once intense and demure, clean yet floral.

Throughout the next year, Mr. Roudnitska sent Ms. Dunne about 40 variations of the scent, she said. Some were too cloying, others too heady.

By the end of 2006, after a stranger on a crowded subway train told Ms. Dunne she smelled great, she and Mr. Roudnitska finalized the recipe for Ellie.

Then Ms. Dunne turned to the packaging. She eschewed an atomizer in favor of an old-fashioned glass bottle with a stopper. She trawled fabric stores in search of grosgrain ribbon narrow enough to slip around the bottleneck. She chose simple graphics for the bottle and gift box, adding tiny French dots for feminine detail.

The result is a modernist rendition of old-school perfumes with a vintage ladylike properness to it. If Ellie were a Broadway musical, it could be called “Thoroughly Modern Grannie.”

Ellie went on sale at Henri Bendel in early 2007, one of 1,160 prestige fragrances available at beauty counters last year, according to NPD.

Blogs like aromascope.com and nowsmellthis.blogharbor.com gave it favorable reviews; a handful of stores like the Studio at Fred Segal in Santa Monica started selling it.

Two months ago, Ms. Dunne introduced her second scent, Ellie Nuit, also designed by Mr. Roudnitska. More contemporary than the original, it is more velvet and less lace doily.

Although her initial production run of 2,000 bottles of each of the two fragrances has yet to sell out, Ellie has become Ms. Dunne’s full-time job. She spends her days pursuing additional retail outlets and personally answering every e-mail message sent to www.elliedperfume.com.

“I had made it as a personal project, and now it is out there in the world,” Ms. Dunne said, as she repackaged her vintage perfume miniatures and popped them into her handbag. “It is like entering a child in a beauty contest, putting it out there for other people to like or dislike.”