

Retailers' Latest Hope: Perfumery as an Art Form

By Molly Prior

The surging stream of fine fragrance has spawned a trickling new tributary: artisanal fragrances crafted by master perfumers driven by a desire to showcase their art.

Several compelling niche concepts and brands — Memoire Liquide at Studio at Fred Segal and Tom Ford's Private Blend, as well as Les Exclusifs de Chanel — are emerging at retail, bent on awakening a consumer interest in the art of perfumery.

The concept of niche fragrances is hardly new, but a fresh guard of deep-pocketed, olfactory-driven entrepreneurs seeks to put a contemporary stamp on perfumery, using rare and expensive ingredients. In addition to tempting the noses of budding fragrance connoisseurs, industry observers noted that these niche scents also provide the olfactive inspiration for large fragrance houses, which then may attempt to create a more commercial version of the scent for broader distribution. For high-end retailers, and the shoppers who frequent them, the perfume revival is a welcome reprieve from the rash fragrance launches downstream.

"The resurgence of perfumery is a backlash against commodification of fragrance," declared Robin Coe-Hutshing, owner and creative director of Studio at Fred Segal in Santa Monica, Calif., who in November installed a store-within-a-store concept called Memoire Liquide. The effort, comprising 160 scents that can be worn alone or mixed, seeks to replicate the perfumer's fragrance organ. Coe-Hutshing described it as "vintage perfumery with a modern edge."

Along the back wall of the 300-square-foot space, the scents are housed in 12-oz., master dispensing bottles, each adorned with a custom-designed, gold-etched label. In front of the fragrance library is a half-moon-shape counter that displays the scents in glass vials complete with stirring rod, which customers can use to blend the samples on the acid-free paper provided. Prices range from \$30 to \$75 for a three-pack.

"It's a culmination of everything I've been doing for 24 years," said Coe-Hutshing, who recounted that two decades ago she and her sister, Jennifer Coe-Bakewell, "were two hippie chicks" mixing fragrances.

Today, her store has thousands of bespoke fragrance recipes on file, including many for celebrities who have launched a namesake scent to the masses.

"For us, fragrance is always a strong category. We created the thing we thought we needed," said Coe-Hutshing, referring to Memoire Liquide. "It's about artistry and perfumery."

"It attracts the fragrance fanatic and allows her to create a mini fragrance wardrobe for herself," she added, noting that custom fragrances on file can be adjusted seasonally, as well.

Henri Bendel plans to introduce the Memoire

Liquide concept to its women's boutique here in April.

"We quite like that it's accessible," said Claudia Lucas, senior vice president and general merchandise manager of beauty for Henri Bendel. Referring to the value quotient of Memoire Liquide, she noted, "It's the fragrance equivalent to MAC Cosmetics."

"Suddenly, there's a strong interest in heritage fragrance houses," said Lucas, naming Annick Goutal and L'Artisan Parfumeur. "Consumers are yearning for something that feels real. They are interested in ingredients and they want the whole story behind the scent."

"It's about allowing the customer to be the nose. It represents the flip side of what's happening in fragrance," said Lucas referring to commercial scents.

Recently, Henri Bendel added Smiley, developed by Firmenich, to its fragrance offerings. The scent, bearing the Smiley face license, is

billed as an "olfactive antidepressant," given that it contains certain accords that promote happiness, according to marketing director Thibaud Perrin, who was raised in Grasse, France, a global perfume hub.

"To me, it feels like sunshine in a bottle," said Lucas Wednesday at Henri Bendel's semi-annual beauty breakfast, which spotlights up-and-coming brands.

Henri Bendel is peppering its 500-square-foot fragrance area, which comprises solely niche brands, with promising artisanal scents. The current lot ranges from the ladylike Ellie D Perfume founder Jessica Dunne's tribute to her grandmother created with master French perfumer Michel Roudnitska — to the irreverent Etat Libre d'Orange, a collaboration with Givaudan perfumers that bears the tag line, "*Le parfum est mort, vive le parfum*" (Fragrance is dead, long live fragrance).

As he spritzed each of the scents — including Jasmin et Cigarette (jasmine and cigarette), Secretions Magnifiques (magnificent secretions) and Putain des Palaces (hotel slut) — on scented strips, Etienne de Swardt, creator of Etat Libre d'Orange said, the line was provocative and playful, but hinged on well-constructed scents.

"You get this level of artistry when you don't play it safe," said Lucas, gesturing toward the Etat Libre d'Orange display.

The Canadian specialty store Holt Renfrew plans to introduce Etat Libre d'Orange in March.