

Fragrance Classifications

Reviewed by Luca Turin Ph.D.

The 'Emperor of Scent' and the author of 'Parfums : Le Guide'

In the remote past, when women were full of little secrets, they didn't so much choose a perfume as marry it. For the lucky ones, life was simple: a two-ounce bottle of Joy would last longer than the average lover, there were only three or four fragrance firms to worry about and everyone else appeared to be wearing Violette de Toulouse. As for men, they asked their barber and walked home with Aqua Velva.

Things have since got more interesting: there are now 400 new fragrance launches a year, and even the duty-free at Khabarovsk Airport tries to sell you things named after celebrities you've never heard of. Until recently, walking across the ground floor of a department store meant fending off painted creatures armed with sprays, furies in a fragrant circle of Hell. Then came the much-imitated Sephora, a chain of stores where you can smell in your own time, and everything became easy again. Everything, that is, except choosing.

Fortunately, the human talent for classification has not been idle. The great German firm of Haarmann & Reimer, now renamed Symrise after merging with their arch-rivals Dragoco, produces a wonderful genealogy poster of fragrance. The vertical axis is time, starting with Fougère Royale in 1881, the horizontal is a spectrum of fragrances from floral to leather. That, of course, is the hard bit, because nobody agrees where things fit. The taxonomy committee of the Société Technique des Parfumeurs de France spends agreeable hours each month in arcane discussions on the subject.

Lately, this field has found its Linnaeus in Michael Edwards. A perfume lover of rare and erudite passion, he has developed the only classification scheme that actually works, and put together a superb book.

How does it work?

Suppose your mother judiciously wore K by Krizia in 1981. Look it up in the index, you will find that it belongs in the "Soft Florals" of which Chanel No 5 is the prototype. Once you have landed on that page, you see that it sits in the 'Crisp' column, one of four ranging from Fresh to Rich. Each contains dozens of perfumes with date of creation. Study this for a while and you can confidently stride into your local perfumery to demand Royalissime by Prince Henri d'Orléans before settling reluctantly for the (vastly superior) White Linen.