

BY TIFFANY FIGUEIREDO PHOTOS BY RALPH LAUER

BEAUTY

The Sniff Test

One woman follows her nose through the Internet in search of her signature fragrance.

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ne of my fondest wishes is to be one of those women who has a signature scent.

My grandmother, every time I saw her, left not only bright-red lipstick on my cheek but a cloud of Clinique's Aromatics Elixir swirling around my head. And then there's my glamorous girlfriend from Highland Park, whom I've seen pull from her Dolce & Gabbana evening bag a daggerlike flacon of Jivago 24K, a perfume filled, naturally, with real gold flakes. Even my free-spirited fifth-grade teacher makes this list. She instilled in me a love of writing but also a loathing of patchouli.

As much as I envy other women's (and men's) ability to hone in on a scent and make it their own, I have never found a fragrance that I wanted to keep or even liked terribly much. As a teenager, I simply wore whatever everyone else was wearing, no matter how ill-conceived the choice.

I graduated from Love's Baby Soft to Jean Nate to Lauren to Obsession to Tiffany and even, I'm embarrassed to say, to Joop!. Then I took on more grown-up scents: Joy, Paris, several of the Chaneels, Fracas, Opium, Eau de Cartier and, most recently, Prada, which oddly enough contains a patchouli note.

Just before Christmas this past year, my husband asked if I'd like a bottle of perfume in my stocking. I surveyed the graveyard of dusty bottles on my vanity and told him to hold that thought. Clearly, I needed more than a headache-inducing, drive-by department store spritzing or the vague swipe of a scented magazine ad to lead me to my next fragrance. I wanted something special, something to love, but I needed to start with an olfactory education. For that I turned to a place where true perfume connoisseurs would be chatting it up: the blogosphere.

At Basenotes (www.basenotes.com), I searched a database of more than 9,500 fragrances for Prada, the last scent I pur-

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chased, and learned about its top, middle and base notes. I was then able to enter those notes into a search engine to find other perfumes I might like. For each perfume in the database, Basenotes editor Grant Osborne and his columnists offer exhaustive information, including the perfume's notes, designer, bottle designer, year launched and real-world reviews from folks who join the community. There is even a message board with discussions dedicated to people suffering from "fragrance abuse" and those who want to swap barely used bottles with other fickle buyers.

It is a rabbit-hole of a site, with one perfume listing leading to another and another, until one finds that hours of the day have gone missing.

Several bleary-eyed days later, I run across Now Smell This (<http://nowsmellthis.blogspot.com/>), a blog offering near-daily perfume-industry news and spot-on reviews of fragrances, both new and old. The editor, a perfume fan from rural Pennsylvania known as Robin K., has an uncanny ability to accurately describe a scent in a way that the highly paid, esoteric beauty editors from the fashion magazines cannot. It is here that I learn about the online sampling programs offered by both Internet and brick-and-mortar perfume retailers.

My first stop is LuckyScent (www.luckyscent.com), the online arm of West Hollywood's hip Scent Bar boutique. LuckyScent offers nearly 400 samples of unique fragrances from niche perfumers such as The Different Company, Susanne Lang, Sage, Miller Harris and Comme De Garçons priced at \$2-\$5 for a 1/32-ounce vial. This user-friendly site is divided into categories such as floral fruity, masculine, sweet and aquatic. I head straight for the unique/exotic section, where each fragrance is described in detail and includes candid user reviews. I choose a handful of intriguing fragrances. Twenty dollars (including \$3 shipping) and several days later, they arrive in my mailbox nicely cocooned in plastic bubble wrap. Each day, I try a new sample. My methodology is to make a quick yea or nay decision based on my initial gut



reaction. The nays I pass along to friends (or in some cases the wastebasket), the yeas I wear for a few days while asking people to give me their opinions on them. I narrow it down to one fabulous find: Escentric 01 by Escentric Molecules. I am absolutely in love with this perfume, but with thousands more out there to try, I cannot commit.

Next, I head to Perfume Bay (www.perfumbay.com), which seems to have samples of every fragrance, both men's and women's, ever sold in a department store. Here I find samples from high-end lines such as Creed, Chanel, Bvlgari, Gucci, Christian Dior, Hermès and

Molinard at \$2-\$4 each. I order several, this time based solely on the illustrations featured on the cards housing each vial (sort of like judging books by their covers). I'm charged \$5.95 for shipping and receive a colorful package of samples a few days later. I don't find anything I'm crazy about in this batch, but I highly recommend this site for anyone who wants to try the latest perfumes from the big fashion houses.

I move on to Beauty Habit (www.beautyhabit.com), a California-based Web retailer offering a nicely edited mix of fragrances, skin care, hair care, candles and cosmetics. For \$11, I'm able to order six samples of anything on the site. Though I'm tempted to try some of the lotions and potions, I stick to perfumes, choosing six from lines that I've read have a celebrity cult following, such as Child, Comptoir Sud Pacifique, Kai and Creative Scen-tualization. The samples arrive in a cellophane bag tied with raffia and include a hand-written thank-you card from the person who packed them. I begin sampling and narrow it down to a favorite: Diptyque Philosykos, a deliciously light fig-based fragrance that, with a surname like Figueiredo, I feel destined to wear.

With two perfumes in the running for my future signature scent, I'm reluctant to send off for more samples, but my beauty-product-addicted stepsister persuades me to check out London-based Ormonde Jayne (www.ormondejayne.com). The beautifully designed site showcases the handmade perfumes of Linda Pilkington. For around \$40 I'm

able to try all 10 fragrances, including two for men. Although this package takes a bit longer to arrive from London, it is worth the wait. Each of the scents is a treasure in its own way, but I have two favorites: Frangipani Absolute, a beautiful tropical concoction, and Isfarkand, a cedar-based stunner for men that smells fabulous on my husband.

Having had the world of fragrance opened up to me, I could keep ordering samples indefinitely, but I decide it's time to pull the trigger and buy each of the ones that I've fallen for, different though they are. And while I may not have found a signature scent, I have found some special, deeply personal fragrances to fit all of my moods. Instead of being the woman who wears so-and-so perfume, I'll just be the woman who always smells great.

Tiffany Figueiredo is a Fort Worth-based writer and editor with a nose for all things stylish, including perfume.

