

Take five

If any scent can sum up a century, it's Chanel No 5. With the launch of a fourth variation in the air, those in the nose explain why it's still number one

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PHOTOGRAPHY EDWARD URRUTIA



This fragrance," legendary perfumer Jacques Polge explains, "is the answer for all those women who tell me, 'No 5 is fantastic, but it's not for me.'" As Chanel's in-house 'nose' for the past 30 years, Polge has created some of the greatest scents of our time, including Allure, Chance, Coco, Coco Mademoiselle and Antaeus for Men. Now in his 60s, the fragrance master is thoughtful as he reclines his tall frame in an armchair to talk about Chanel's newest scent, No 5 Eau Première.

Polge has a thick French accent and apologises at the outset that his English isn't all it could be. But as he takes time to answer questions, he gives the impression that it's the depth of his thoughts, not the language barrier, that delays his responses.

The son of a doctor, Polge is an intelligent fellow who loves reading poetry and creating it, too – with his fragrances. "Perfume is a form of poetry from the point of view that although it does not have words, it means a lot," he muses.

But just as Coco Chanel was famous for her minimalist approach to design, Polge, too, takes a simplified view of the industry in which he's been a leading light for so long. "I've learnt perfume can be more simple than people perceive it. They talk about all these 'families', [but] I'd say there are only two – the good and the bad," he laughs. "I've come to a simplistic notion that I realise is important; when a person likes a fragrance and you ask them about it, the term 'fresh' comes up."

He's not talking about the freshness of lemon >

or mint. "It means, 'I like the scent,' so that's a very important point whenever I create a fragrance." And 'fresh' is the clear thrust of the latest interpretation of No 5, which has been re-engineered by Polge himself.

This latest addition means there are now four variations of No 5 and, although they share the same ingredients, they all smell different.

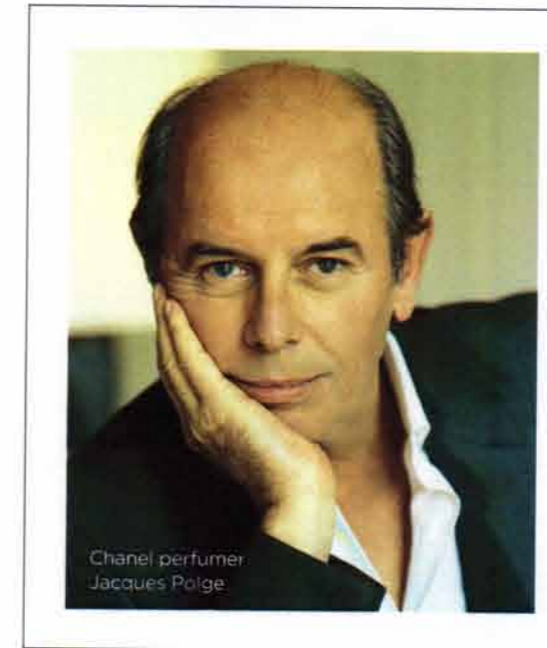
The original, which these days is called 'parfum', was created in 1921 by Russian-born perfumer Ernest Beaux. He worked for the Rallet fragrance company in Moscow, supplying the royal family, until the Russian Revolution of 1917, when he fled to Grasse in southeastern France. Shortly after, he met Coco Chanel. Though it was still early in her career, she was ambitious and enthusiastic about fragrance. Before long, she had Beaux making one for her. She wanted a fragrance that was completely different to those on the market, which were floral creations housed in ornate crystal bottles featuring angels, flowers and the like. As with her fashion, Chanel wanted to take an entirely modern approach.

"The challenge we had with Eau Première was how to make No 5 for today, for this new era, and how to make a fragrance that is going to last into the future"

Aldehydes (a unique chemical group made from alcohol and natural materials, such as lemon or orange zest and various leaves) were a recent discovery at the time. On their own, the odours are overwhelming and often metallic, but Beaux experimented, using minute amounts in his perfumes, and found they gave a sparkle and strength, particularly to floral notes.

No 5 was the first of its kind to feature this whiz-bang technology. However, Chanel also wanted a fragrance that would be too difficult for competitors to replicate, so Beaux loaded it with jasmine (1000 flowers to 30mls of extract), which was, and still is, one of the most expensive plant oils. If they couldn't outfox competitors with science, they would with expense. The aldehydes and jasmine were blended with neroli, May rose, ylang-ylang, sandalwood, vetiver and vanilla, then poured into a minimalist glass bottle – and Chanel No 5 was born.

No doubt related to the expense of the parfum, the eau de toilette version was created by Beaux in 1924, using a lower concentration, which gave it a lighter scent. The next incarnation, the eau de parfum, wasn't created until 1986, at the hands of Polge. The fashion of the day was big perfumes; Yves Saint Laurent Opium, Giorgio Beverly Hills, even Guerlain's 1925 Shalimar was having a revival. It was a time when women were discovering sexy feminism, striding into work to smash glass ceilings, wearing fuchsia lipstick and shoulder pads. So rather than produce a scent between the parfum and the eau de toilette, Polge tweaked the formula, changing the proportions and amplifying the vanillic, woody aspects. It worked a treat, garnering a new generation of No 5 devotees.



Chanel perfumer
Jacques Polge

Almost 25 years later, what is it we're looking for now? Polge's co-conspirator at Chanel, perfumer Christopher Sheldrake, explains that society will always dictate fashion. "A number of things have happened," he says. "We're aware of ecology and cleaning up everything – exhaust fumes, no smoking, that sort of thing. Since the '80s, we've gone through a whole evolution [in perfumery]; going to the sea for marine notes and watery transparency, and up mountains for fresh air with ozone [notes]. Society has, in fact, affected everything and all these changes influence fragrances. The challenge we had with Eau Première was how to make No 5 for today, for this new era, and [how to make] a fragrance that's going to last into the future."

What did they come up with? A shimmering, mirage of No 5; a scent that's lighter, prettier and more effervescent, but with the creaminess of a good quality vetiver and vanilla beneath the floral froth. And what's gone? The old-world dose of the medicinal and slightly musty-smelling ylang-ylang is still there, but it's been toned down, and the jasmine isn't as overwhelming. For all its lightness and airiness, Eau Première still has a strong sillage (the waft of perfumed air that follows you) and very good staying power. It's an absolute winner.

Sheldrake offers to let me smell each note on its own and I really appreciate how divine each one is. Even the aldehyde has a more amber aspect than its typically metallic version. By the time we reach the vanilla, I'm thinking angels have been in the room.

Polge believes that, as a perfumer, he's in the ideal job. "I'm very lucky, working for Chanel. It's the best place to be for somebody such as me. Because No 5 goes back to 1921, I have at my disposal almost

a complete palette, ranging from the most traditional products – ingredients that few perfumers can use today – to the latest molecules."

He's a firm believer that all fragrances should have mystery, a certain something that you can't put your finger on. So, although I have the luxury of chatting to two master perfumers, neither will divulge the new formula. Polge says the scent has "all the mysteriousness of No 5, but it's perhaps less obvious because it's a perfume that is lighter."

"It's something easier to wear, so I'd say it's fresher – I like the word 'fresh' very much," he explains. "There's a transparency, a softness, a delicateness in this perfume that's more accentuated than in all the others."

Polge quietly reflects on his career as a perfumer, explaining how dull it seemed to him at the start. But even though he didn't really understand it initially, he always believed he should persevere. "I think it was the poetic dimension of perfume that interested me. It's been a long experience," he adds, "but I'd like to do it all again." **SM**

Chanel No 5 Eau Première, \$180 (75ml), will be available from October 12 at major department stores and selected pharmacies.

No 5 through the ages

Chanel No 5, in all its incarnations, smells different on everybody, so trialling each one is the only way to find out which is best for you. These are the quintessential differences:

Parfum 1921

This is the most concentrated version and has incredible staying power. It has strong neroli and ylang-ylang notes that dry down to a sublime, lingering jasmine.



Eau de Toilette 1924

Most EDTs contain between four and eight per cent of the pure juice. This is intensely neroli at the beginning, with a woodier drydown.



Eau de Parfum 1986

EDPs generally have between 15 and 18 per cent juice. This one has staying power, with a greater emphasis on the woods and vanilla as it develops.



Eau Première 2008

This seems to have the concentration of an EDP. Picture a mirage in the desert with shimmering, airy, aldehydic, floral notes in the top and a vanilla, vetiver creaminess in the drydown.

