



Moments in time

Almost 100 years after Mademoiselle Chanel opened her first boutique, a new fragrance collection is celebrating the life of one of the 20th century's most influential women. Suzanne Wangmann takes a walk down Coco's memory lane of scents that are anything but common

Spanning both the fashion and beauty worlds, no other brand carries quite the same cachet as Chanel. The name Gabrielle 'Coco' Chanel is synonymous with luxury and cutting-edge style. But take a closer look at the woman who became a legend and you'll find her beginnings were far from illustrious.

Born in 1883 into a poor family in rural France, Coco's father was a travelling salesman and her mother was a clerk. At 12, her mother died and she and her older sister were sent to an orphanage. They later attended a boarding school, as charity cases.

At 20, she began work in a hosiery shop and met her first lover, Étienne Balsan, a rich, married gentleman who let her live in his country house. It marked the beginning of a life of opportunity. Coco may have been a kept woman, but she was very well kept, with theatrical friends and a lifestyle that involved parties, days out at the racetrack – Balsan was a huge fan – and overseas holidays. Coco passed the time by making hats for herself and her friends, and was eager to start her own business. Although Balsan never took her business ideas very seriously, he allowed her to move into his apartment in Paris in 1910, where she started work.

As the relationship with Balsan floundered, Coco found love in the arms of one of his best friends, an English polo player named Arthur 'Boy' Capel, who she would later say was her one true love. Capel had more faith in her plans and helped Coco move her business to a larger, more salubrious salon at 21 rue Cambon. Within a few years, her millinery savvy had transformed the fashion for overembellished, feather- and flower-strewn hats into simpler, more practical styles, much like those we see today.

After hats came clothes and, likewise, she turned the established fashion code on its head, daring to wear 'sportswear' to the racetrack. Her other signature pieces include women's jodhpurs, the scandalous 'pyjama pants' for weekend wear, the women's swimsuit for the beach, the classic little black dress, the Chanel suit, layered pearls, quilted leather... The list goes on.

You could write a book on her (and many have) but one version most haven't heard is her life story through fragrance. And it was perfume, historians say, that made her fortune. Coco died in 1971, 50 years after launching the infamous No 5.

As all perfume lovers know, a fragrance can take you back to a moment in time, so when the House of Chanel began looking to extend its boutique collection of four perfumes – all formulated by Chanel's first perfume director, Ernest Beaux – the decision was made to add six new fragrances directly inspired by Coco's life to form a perfect 10.

These fragrances were created by Jacques Polge, Chanel's current resident perfumer, assisted by Christopher Sheldrake, who joined Chanel in 2005 as director of research and development.

A word to the wise: these fragrances aren't for everyone. Apart from the high price tag (\$330 per 200ml EDT), they are not mass-consumption items and each has a very individual smell. But what fun it is to sample them and think of Coco's adventures.

'Les Exclusif' collection is available at the Chanel boutiques in Melbourne, (03) 9671 3533, and Sydney, (02) 9233 4800.



CUIR DE RUSSIE

In 1927, Beaux and Coco created Cuir de Russie (meaning Russian leather). "A wonderful fragrance," says Sheldrake. "Almost a tribute to Dimitri, inspired by the way the leather was tanned using birch tar. Birch tar has an elegance – its own leathery smell. This was an era when there was a lot of Russian influence in Paris." In fact, Coco created her own collection inspired by the country, including peasant blouses and embroidered tunics. (Her lover, Pavlovich (below), was Russki royalty, being first cousin to the last Tsar, Nicholas Romanov, and rumoured to be one of Rasputin's assassins.)

The fragrance features mandarin and bergamot, balsam, incense, cade wood, rose and ylang-ylang.



COLOGNE

In 1924, Coco launched a cologne. Typically weak concentrations of citrus zest and herbs in an alcohol or vinegar base, colognes were used primarily as body spritzes to deodorise. "Her cologne at the time was more traditional with a lot of rosemary, thyme and so on, which today is a little bit dated. In this one," Sheldrake says of the new formulation, "we've accentuated the orange blossom, which I love. On the skin, it's sunny and happy. It's not an eau de cologne in the traditional way – this is much more a transparent floral fragrance." (It's also the only one of the 10 available in a 400ml bottle.)

BEL RESPIRO

In 1920, Coco bought a country house, 'Bel Respiro', at Garches on the outskirts of Paris. "It was a place where she escaped for weekends to have fresh air and where she would entertain friends," explains Sheldrake. Coco's lover at the time, Russian Grand Duke Dimitri Pavlovich, lived at the house, as did composer Igor Stravinsky (left), who stayed for two years. (Some say he wrote the ballet *Pulcinella* there.) Popular playwright of the time Henri Bernstein lived right next door. Sheldrake explains the notes of Bel Respiro, saying, "Basically, they're all ingredients found in nature to reconstitute the effect of fresh air and cut grass: blended herbs, jasmine and mandarin. It's a lovely, natural, green, outdoorsy fragrance. "Karl [Lagerfeld] loves this fragrance, by the way," he adds.

NO 22

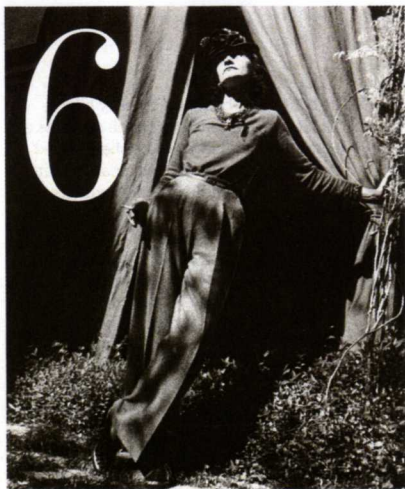
French-born perfumer Ernest Beaux had worked for the Rallet perfume company, supplier to the Russian Imperial Court. Following the Russian Revolution in 1917, Beaux moved from Moscow to the French fragrance hub, Grasse, where Pavlovich introduced him to Coco. She was apparently fascinated by him and together they started working on ideas for perfumes. It was 1921 when Beaux presented Coco with a number of fragrance samples; she chose two. The first was No 5, the best-selling floral aldehyde, and the second was No 22, which was launched the following year. No 22 has been part of the boutique collection since. Never sold in department stores or perfumeries, it's always had a very limited distribution. "Another timeless fragrance," says Sheldrake. "It has some of the aldehydic notes of No 5, but on the skin it's much rosier. Although we say the main ingredient is tuberose, for me, it's an abstract fragrance that is powdery, rosy and ambery. It has a very retro feel."



GARDÉNIA

Coco loved the purity of camellia and used it as the symbol of her brand, but, unfortunately, it has no fragrance, so Beaux suggested gardenia. "Using white flowers in perfumes was an entirely new thing in 1925 and well before its time," says Sheldrake. This was also the year when Coco started a relationship with 'the richest man in England', Bend'or, Duke of Westminster. They stayed together until 1931. It also began her love affair with all things English, including tweed, which was to influence her fashion for many years to come.





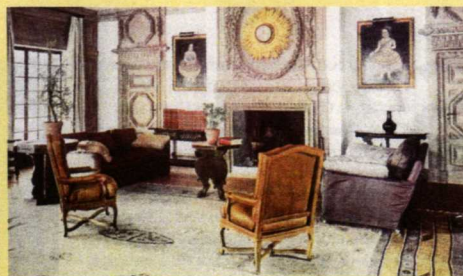
BOIS DES ILES

In Paris, during the mid-'20s, the jazz era took over. Anything considered exotic was the height of fashion. People flocked to see nightclub performer Josephine Baker and the wealthy took grand tours of the world, travelling by ship to far-flung destinations. In 1926, Coco released Bois des Iles. "It's very poetic," explains Sheldrake. "Bois des Iles means 'the woods of the islands' - it's the whole idea of bringing back exotic things from little islands a long, long way away. It's a sophisticated perfume built on sandalwood." The fragrance is a rich combination of vetiver, tonka bean, vanilla and gingerbread, along with jasmine, rose, ylang-ylang and, of course, sandalwood. Although it had often been used before, Sheldrake believes Bois des Iles was the first true woody fragrance formulated for women.



31 RUE CAMBON

In 1928, Coco left her small salon at 21 rue Cambon and moved down the street to number 31, a three-storey boutique, which remains the flagship Chanel salon to this day. Here, in the main salon, she showed her couture collections, with the garments reflected dozens of times over in the mirrors on each wall. The fragrance 31 rue Cambon is a classic 'chypre'. The word chypre means Cyprus in French and refers to the villagers on the island, who would take oak moss, wrap it in sticky labdanum leaves to form balls and hang them in their rooms to perfume the air; the combination is a sensual, mossy, slightly sweet accord. "I find this the most elegant fragrance of the collection," Sheldrake says. "If you wanted a colour for this, it would be black, like the little black dress; very elegant, grown-up, an evening fragrance. I love this one."



28 LA PAUSA

In 1928, Coco celebrated her 45th birthday and the Duke of Westminster gave her a plot of land in the south of France, with spectacular views of Monte Carlo and the Mediterranean Sea. He also financed the building of a holiday mansion, 'La Pausa' ('The Pause') on it. Coco regularly visited during the construction of the seven-bedroom residence, modelling part of it on the convent where she had lived as a teenager. The house was surrounded by exotic gardens. "People would go to the Mediterranean to paint and spend the summers. She would invite her friends down there to rest," explains Sheldrake, "including Salvador Dali and his wife, Gala. It's an area on the French-Italian border that is very famous for its irises. In fact, we buy all our irises from Italy. La Pausa is inspired by the flowers in her garden. For me, it's probably the most feminine fragrance of the collection, but even this has a woodiness to it, which is a natural aspect of the flower. La Pausa is powdery, a little bit rosy, but the key is the iris." When the relationship with Westminster ended in 1931, Chanel took up with Paul Iribe, a fashion illustrator who worked for Paramount Studios in Hollywood and was the art director for Cecil B DeMille's epic *The Ten Commandments*. Coco even claimed to be engaged to him - the only engagement in her life. Tragically, he dropped dead on the tennis court at La Pausa. Both were aged 52 at the time.



COROMANDEL

Throughout her life, Coco was a collector of Coromandel screens - antique Chinese screens made of ebony, painted with black lacquer and containing gold leaf, jade and shell. Her collection of more than 32 screens began after Boy Capel took her to an antique store in the early days of their relationship. (Capel married another woman in 1918 and was killed in a car accident a year later.) The screens adorned the walls of Coco's main city apartment at the Ritz Hotel in Paris, and across the road at 31 rue Cambon. She was often photographed in front of the sumptuous black screens. "The Coromandel fragrance is inspired by the atmosphere in Mademoiselle Chanel's apartment," says Sheldrake. "The fragrance is an interpretation of that whole era. There's benzoin [resin] from China, frankincense from the Middle East, patchouli from Indonesia." Coromandel is a true Oriental fragrance with a sensual amber accord.



NO 18

From early on in her career, Coco encouraged women to wear 'paste' (fake jewellery) - including her famous ropes of pearls - but, in 1932, she held an exhibition of diamond jewellery that she had designed herself. (This was considered an audacious move as she was not a trained jeweller, and it was deemed to be a 'man's occupation'.) Coco held the exhibition at the apartment where she lived with Paul Iribe. She hired security to watch over the collection, which also caused a stir, as it suggested her well-heeled guests might steal the jewels. No 18 is named after the address at Place Vendôme in Paris that now houses Chanel's jewellery (left). Place Vendôme is home to many of the finest jewellery houses in Europe, including Cartier and Boucheron. "This fragrance is inspired by the idea of transparent crystals and the scent is the ambrette seed," says Sheldrake. "It's the seed from the hibiscus and, today, it's very rarely used in perfumery. In the 1920s, it was something that was used a little and it was one of the ingredients in Bois des Iles, and also in Egoïste for Men. This fragrance is extremely original. It has a lychee top note and quite an alcoholic smell, like a gin and tonic."

