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"A woman's perfume tells more about her than her handwriting." – Christian Dior

"What remains of a woman when she is in the dark? When she has undressed, when we can no longer see her make-up, her wonderful hair, her beautiful eyes... when she's taken off her jewellery, what is left? Only her charming voice and her perfume." – Jean-Paul Guerlain

"A woman who doesn't wear perfume has no future." – Coco Chanel

Perhaps Mademoiselle Chanel's position on perfume seems a little dramatic, but we certainly take the icon's point. The most personal part of a woman's beauty kit, fragrance is also one of the most powerful. Silently, invisibly it can intoxicate the senses, capture the imagination and stir the deepest memory. It dresses thought and conveys mood, without the lips ever breathing a word.

Yet, for all it reveals, perfume is also mysterious. Intangible and described in poetic metaphor, fragrance can be headachingly intimidating for those simply sniffing out a new scent for the season. Who hasn't felt overwhelmed by the profusions of perfume in a department store? Or been bewildered by talk of *eau de* this and *floriental* that?

But it needn't be so puzzling. Learning the fundamentals of fragrance is a lot like wine appreciation – you don't have to be a boffin to enjoy it, but a grasp of the basics helps you find a potion to suit your personality, your mood and the occasion perfectly.

The ABCs of EDPs

Not all 'perfumes' are created equal. Different compositions contain varying amounts of aromatic compound (essential oils or aroma chemicals), with disparities of strength and longevity upon the skin.

An ***extrait*** (extract) or **perfume** is the most potent and long-lasting form of fragrance, containing a 20-40 per cent concentration of aromatic compound. It is often also the most expensive.

Eau de parfum (EDP) comprises 10-30 per cent aromatic compound and is one of the most common forms of 'perfume' on a fragrance counter.

Eau de toilette (EDT) counts a 5-20 per cent concentration of aromatic compound and is usually less expensive than an EDP.

Cologne is a very light type of fragrance and, with just 2-5 per cent of aromatic compound, is often intended to be splashed all over your body.

Fragrant families

In the 1980s, fragrance guru Michael Edwards set out to unlock the secrets known almost exclusively by revered 'noses' and perfume professionals. His key: the now internationally recognised **Fragrance Wheel.**

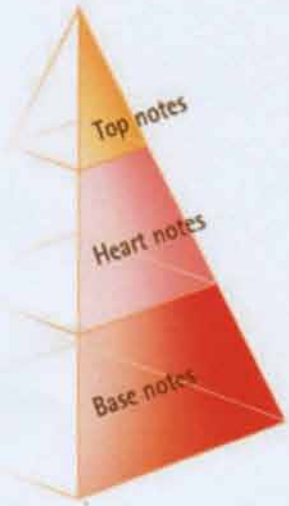
"The **fragrance families** hold the key to everyone's likes and dislikes," he explains in his book *Fragrances of the World*. Categorising fragrances into families based on sets of characteristics, the Edwards **Fragrance Wheel** lets us see how scents are similar or different to each other, making it easier to find the types we most enjoy. "It is likely that at least two of [most peoples'] favourite fragrances belong to the same 'family'," he writes.

The 13 families blend into and out of one another as different ingredients are added. They are: **Citrus, Green, Water, Floral, Soft Floral, Floral Oriental, Soft Oriental, Oriental, Woody Oriental, Woods, Mossy Woods, Dry Woods and Aromatic Fougere.**

Invisible architecture

Close your eyes and spritz a little fragrance into the air...

Which scents strike you first? Do they change in the first few minutes? Most fragrances have a structure that can be visualised as a pyramid. "Think of it as an evaporating cone, divided into three sections," explains Australian fragrance designer John Lambeth. "From the top down, the layers disappear, revealing the whole fragrance."



Top (lead) notes
These form the 'pointy' end of the fragrance and are the first notes you notice upon venturing a sniff. "It's like the clothes on a person," describes Lambeth. "It's a first impression, [upon which] you make an initial judgement." These usually fade within 15 minutes of application and will change from 'sharp' to 'dull' as they disappear.

Middle (heart) notes
Uncovered as the top notes fade away, these are "where the fragrance really reveals its character," says Lambeth. 'Rounded' and mellow, middle notes don't leap out at you like top notes and are less changeable over time, lasting on your skin longer.

Base (bottom) notes
Showing themselves around half an hour after application, these are the trail of the fragrance. In harmony with the middle notes, these will linger on your skin for many hours.

Finding your fragrance

Remember the Fragrance Wheel – If your last fragrance was an **oriental** but you're up for a little change, try a **soft oriental** or a **floral oriental** on for size. Or if you're feeling adventurous, go for a **citrus** scent or a **green**. Ask a fragrance consultant which scents fit into which families.
Don't buy on impulse – Consider the dissolving pyramid. Allow a fragrance to develop over a few hours to ensure you enjoy it from top to trail.
Try only two or three fragrances at a time – Any more than that may overload your sense of smell.
Play your cards right – Ensure you begin with a fresh, clean card, then spritz only the tip and hold the opposite end. This prevents 'contamination' of the fragrance.
Start afresh – Don't wear one scent out shopping for another. This will only cloud your judgement.
It's all about you – Don't buy something because you like it on someone else. Your particular skin chemistry can make a fragrance smell quite unique.

Updating your fragrance wardrobe

A signature scent is all well and good, but not all scents suit every season or occasion. Besides, sometimes you just need a change. As perfumer Christopher Brosius says: "Some of the most beautiful perfumes are like a ballgown, but sometimes you just want to wear a comfortable pair of jeans."

Fine new fragrances & timeless classics for winter:

Belle en Rykiel by Sonia Rykiel EDP (from $59) – A voluptuous **oriental** with a smooth, sensual trail of amber, mahogany wood, frankincense and vanilla. Wear it to: A glam night out with the girls.
Agent Provocateur Maitresse EDP (from $121.95) – A sexy **soft floral** that interlaces lotus petals, ylang ylang and violet with powdery iris and patchouli. Wear it to: An intimate night out, or in...
Issey Miyake L'Eau D'Issey 'A Drop on a Petal' (limited edition, from $114) – A fresh and clean reinterpretation of the classic L'Eau D'Issey **water** fragrance, this features floral top notes and a lingering woody base. Wear it to: Work, lunch with the in-laws and day dates.
Escentric Molecules Molecule 01 ($230) – This ultra exclusive **woods** fragrance stars the aroma chemical Iso E Super, which bears the sweet scent of cedar and sandalwood. Wear it to: Anywhere you want to stand out in the crowd.
Dior Miss Dior Cherie EDT (from $78) – A chic **mossy woods** fragrance with deliciously sweet notes of caramelised popcorn mingling with refined bergamot and patchouli. Wear it to: A day of shopping and spa indulgence with your girlfriends.
Chanel 31 Rue Cambon EDT from the Les Exclusifs collection ($300) – Inspired by Coco Chanel's studio, boutique and sometime home in Paris, this elegant **chypre** is vivid with spice, mossy wood and lush flowers. Wear it to: The theatre or an evening event where only the most sophisticated dress will do.
Calvin Klein Euphoria EDP (from $90) – This **woody oriental** became an instant classic with its rare blend of pomegranate, black orchid, black violet, amber and mahogany. Wear it with: A slinky LBD and smoky eyes.
Penhaligon's Lily & Spice EDP ($135) – An intriguing **floral** with the refined lightness of lily and the dark sensuality of brown patchouli. Wear it with: Crisp whites, soft leather and a witty sense of humour.
L'Artisan Parfumeur Vanilia EDT ($155) – This creamily sensual **oriental** spices delicious vanilla with sexy ylang ylang and sandalwood. Wear it with: A luxuriously woolly sweater against your bare skin.
Crabtree & Evelyn Found EDP ($49.95) – Featuring spun sugar and caramel muddled with a warm heart of cassis, bay rose and cardamom, this **soft floral** is a heartwarmer. Wear it with: Your cosiest winter layers and the brightest smile you've got.

Wear it well

Stay subtle – Only those within arm's reach should be able to detect your fragrance.
Where to wear – You can apply fragrance to your pulse points, spray it into the air and walk though the mist, pop a little on your palms or follow the Coco Chanel rule: wear it wherever you want to be kissed.
Fragrance fatigue – The more you wear a fragrance, the less you'll be able to notice it. So don't go overboard – if you're not sure you've got enough on, ask someone else! Switching between a few fragrances can keep your senses sharp.
Skin scents – The oils in an oilier skin type can intensify fragrance while a dry skin does not hold scent as long.
Layering – Lather a scented shower gel and slather on a matching body lotion before your fragrance to prolong its life upon your skin.
Fragrance rises – Remember to apply a scent to your wrists and lower pulse points as well as behind your ears.
Freshen up – A light spray of water can help release scent that has sunk into your pores and revitalise your fragrance.
Take care – Preserve perfumed products by keeping them away from direct sunlight and extremes of temperature. But don't archive them. Fragrances are meant to be opened and enjoyed.

- Tracey Withers

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The fragrance families

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The fragrance families as defined by Michael Edwards, author and publisher of *Fragrances of the World*:

THE FRAGRANCE WHEEL
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Citrus: Fragrances derived from the oils of citrus fruits like lemon, mandarin, orange and grapefruit, with a tangy, refreshing character. Fragrances include Calvin Klein cK One, Green Tea by Elizabeth Arden, Miller Harris Citron and Carthusia Mediterraneo.

Green: Capturing the sharp, fresh scent of grass, verdant fields and violet leaves. While some have a casual, outdoorsy character, others can be more formal. Fragrances include: Marc Jacobs Splash Grass, Firefly by Demeter Fragrance Library, Eau de Lierre by Diptyque and Lorenzo Villoresi Yerbamate.

Water: A relatively new type of scent that emerged in he 1990s, these conjure sea breezes and rainstorms, the beach and freshwater lakes. Fragrances include: Issey Miyake L'Eau D'Issey, Calvin Klein Escape and Ralph Lauren Polo Sport Woman.

Floral: From heady bouquets to the delicate scent of a single flower, these fragrances are some of the most loved and widely worn. The rise of aroma chemicals has allowed perfumers to recreate the scent of flowers from which oils could not be traditionally extracted. Fragrances include: Marc Jacobs Perfume, Freesia by Crabtree & Evelyn, Stella McCartney Stella and Sheer Stella, Very Irresistible Givenchy and Tubereuse by L'Artisan Parfumeur.

Soft floral: With the addition of aldehydes, Edwards notes floral scents take on a more powdery, abstract persona. Fragrances include: Chanel No. 5, Avon Crystal Aura, Anna Sui, Jette by Jette Joop, Alien by Thierry Mugler, Vera Wang, Estee Lauder White Linen and Noa by Cacharel.

Floral oriental: Spices, notes of orange flower and aldehydes give florals an oriental flavour. Fragrances include: Yves Saint Laurent Cinema, 5th Avenue After Five by Elizabeth Arden, Chanel Allure, Burberry for Women, Sexual by Michel Germain, Kenzo Flowerbykenzo, Jean Paul Gaultier Classique, Tresor by Lancome, Emporio Armani She and Nadira by Crabtree & Evelyn.

Soft oriental: Flowers muddled with spices, amber and incense create the soft oriental scent. They are less sweet and heavy than a true oriental. Fragrances include: Coco Chanel, Yves Saint Laurent Opium, Ambre Sultan by Serge Lutens and Orange Spice by Creed.

Oriental: From the most exotic of all the families, these fragrances are sensual, opulent and full-bodied with a seductive heaviness. Fragrances include: Calvin Klein Obsession, Belle en Rykiel by Sonia Rykiel, In Control Curious Britney Spears, Shalimar by Guerlain, L de Lolita Lempicka and Moschino.

Woody oriental: Lace an oriental with woody sandalwood or patchouli and you get these deep, sexy characters. Fragrances include: Angel by Thierry Mugler, Calvin Klein Obsession Night, Amber by Renee, Dolce & Gabbana By Woman, Lancome Hypnose and Prada.

Woods: Classic woods include dominant notes of cedar, patchouli, pine, sandalwood and vetiver. Fragrances include: Gucci Rush 2, Kors by Michael Kors, Vetyver by Jo Malone, Molecule 01 by Escentric Molecules and Patchouli by L'Occitane.

Mossy woods: Also known as **chypre** by perfumers, this family takes its name from the foresty notes of oakmoss and amber mixed with citrus. Fragrances include: Sarah Jessica Parker Lovely, Narciso Rodriguez For Her, Darling by Kylie Minogue, Miss Dior by Christian Dior and Gucci Rush.

Dry woods: The mossy wood family moves into drier territory with the inclusion of cedar, tobacco and burnt wood. Also characterised as **leather** as this family includes the smoky scent of Russian leather. Fragrances include: Aromatics Elixir by Clinique, Sarawak by Crabtree & Evelyn, Cashmere Mist by Donna Karan, Ralph Lauren Polo and Vetiver by Lorenzo Villoresi.

Aromatic (fougere): Known as the "universal fragrance family", this set blends citrus and lavender, sweet spices and oriental woods. Many male-oriented fragrances come from this family, but blends of fresh florals, orientals and woody notes are pleasing to the feminine nose too. Fragrances include: Calvin Klein cK Be, Emporio Armani Remix for Him, Drakkar Noir by Guy Laroche, Cool Water by Davidoff, Hugo by Hugo Boss and Tommy by Tommy Hilfiger.