



Natural provenance

ONE MAN'S QUEST TO CAPTURE THE AROMATIC HEART OF HIS HOMETLAND LED TO A REVOLUTION IN FRAGRANCE AND UNLOCKED NATURE'S SECRETS FOR L'OCCITANE

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Summertime in the hills of Provence, in the south of France, brings a patchwork of yellow, green and purple squares to full bloom. The yellow blocks are fields of wheat and sunflowers, the green are hay and wild herbs including sage and rosemary, and the purple is lavender – hectares of it, in neat rows.

Fine lavender, or what the French perfume industry calls 'lavande', thrives high in the hills of northern Provence, about 800m above sea level. Just before the harvesters move in, you can smell it in the air – sweet and floral and pretty, and not a bit like the little bottles of medicinal lavender oil we're familiar with.

More than 30 years ago, a young man called Olivier Baussan, who was born and raised in

the heart of that landscape, had the idea to use the oils and aromas native to Provence in beauty products (Marseille had long been famous for its soaps, after all). So he bought an old copper steamer on wheels, to extract rosemary oil, and made it into bath wash.

This was the mid '70s but, unlike other liquid soaps of the time, his was a natural product using a coconut-based sudsing agent, rather than the sodium laurel sulphate used in most commercial products of the era.

Initially, none of the local shops would stock the revolutionary product, so he sold it himself door-to-door and those who bought it couldn't get enough. That was the start of L'Occitane (pronounced lock-si-tarn), now one of the biggest independent beauty companies in the world.

Today, there are more than 1300 L'Occitane boutiques in 90 countries and thousands more outlets in department stores and pharmacies.

Back in 1976, Baussan was eager to expand his range, so he went to Grasse, Provence's world-famous perfume town, and met with perfumer Lucien Ferrero. Lavande had always been part of Baussan's life and he wanted to expand his little business to include lavender-scented toiletries.

When we meet, the handsome Baussan, now in his late 50s, is sitting beneath a sprawling tree by a field of sunflowers in the Provençal countryside, not far from his home in the quaint village of Forcalquier. "I first met Monsieur Ferrero in his office," he says. "We kept smelling perfume on little strips of blotting paper. >

I told him it wasn't the smell of essential oil I wanted to capture, it was the nature outside. So I took him to where they were distilling lavender and told him I wanted to capture the scent of the steam coming from the stiller – the warm water that the lavender floats in.

"There was also sage in the fields nearby, and rosemary and the heat from the sun... and everything mixed and was carried on the breeze – the smell kept changing. I told Lucien, 'I'm not a nose, I don't know how to make perfume, but I know what I want to feel and experience.'"

That day marked a turning point – more than three decades later, Ferrero is recognised as a world specialist in capturing the natural scent of 'outside'. He's done it many times over the years, in ways you may not have noticed, even if you're a fan of L'Occitane.

Perfumers do a lot more than simply create the fragrances we spray on to smell pretty – they also fragrance products, as Ferrero explains: "If you buy a leather couch, it has a strong scent, but the real smell is actually unpleasant – they cover the whole couch with a new-leather-couch smell, which makes it acceptable to the public.

"It's the same when the cloth for a shirt is woven; on the thread, they use an oil that has an unpleasant smell, so it's covered with a scent that's actually called 'New Clothes'."

It's disorientating when things don't smell as they're supposed to and this applies not just to cotton shirts and leather couches, but also the products we use on our skin.

That first time Baussan approached Ferrero about creating the smell of lavender 'outside', it was about more than doing a lavender range. It was about giving L'Occitane a signature smell, recognisable every time you open a product; be it a face cream or a body scrub, it's a familiar smell, a little touch of Provence that tells you that this is, indeed, L'Occitane.

"We started working together on candles, then soaps and cosmetics," Ferrero recalls. "The important thing to be aware of is that it's not just the active ingredients in a skin cream that make a product enjoyable – it's other things, like the scent."

And with that, he waves a blotter in the air that smells like a delicious, slightly sanitised, rice pudding and explains that it's "red rice", from the oily skin range that was launched by L'Occitane last year.

That's not to say the products don't actually contain red rice (they do, from the marshy Camargue area in the south of Provence), it means the fragrance is enhanced by Ferrero's work and that consumers, once they've used it, will recognise the scent and find it familiar.

AROMA ROAD

L'OCCITANE ON LOCATION



L'Occitane uses organic lavender to make products ranging from perfumes to creams. Aside from the aroma, it's credited with having anti-inflammatory, anti-bacterial and anti-allergenic properties.



Grown in the marshlands in the south of Provence, red rice contains a starch component that helps calm and mattify oily skin and purify and reduce pore size.



L'Occitane uses organic olive oil for its moisturising properties and to help stimulate collagen and elastin in skin.



Used in cosmetics for thousands of years, honey is full of alpha hydroxy acids – including citric, malic and lactic – that exfoliate dead skin but, primarily, honey helps to seal skin so it holds moisture better.



L'Occitane discovered that almonds contain proteins that help smooth the skin, and an extract that helps firm and tighten skin; almond milk makes skin feel softer, while the crushed shells are used for exfoliating.



How could a company from Provence not use this local treasure? The finest plants are grown in the hills around Grasse and are used for their distinctive heady, floral scent.



A variety of juniper that grows wild in Provence, cade is similar to the plant distilled to make gin and it smells like it. The oil was traditionally used by shepherds for its regenerating and strengthening properties.



This is one of the first Provençal trees to blossom each year. The flowers look like wattle – little pompoms of yellow – but the smell isn't as delicate. Strong and spicy, mimosa is used for its scent.



This wild plant from Corsica is used in anti-ageing products. Scientists believe it contains proteins that encourage the expression of the longevity genes. These give skin cells time to repair themselves.



Along with lavender, this is one of Baussan's favourite natural ingredients. Grown in Corsica, where the milder climate and sandy conditions suit it better, it's used for its delicate, fresh, lemon fragrance.

And thanks to the work of Ferrero and his team, the core note is accompanied by other aromas that say 'clean outdoor air and fresh Provençal herbs'.

The L'Occitane scent is one of the brand's greatest triumphs. From the fine lavender of the dry mountain regions, to the olives from around Manosque and the mimosa down on the Mediterranean coast, if it comes from Provence, Baussan has thought of a way to capture it successfully.

Two of the best loved ranges actually have their sources in Corsica, the French territorial island in the Mediterranean, south-east of Provence. Thanks to the climate, the herbs verbena and immortelle thrive there. L'Occitane was the first company to commercially use, and later harvest, the finicky immortelle for skincare creams, and organically, too.

'Natural' is where Baussan came from and where he wants the brand to continue. "Organic shouldn't be just a trendy word – it should be an important word, it should be a value," he explains. "At L'Occitane, we should be preoccupied with ways to improve the world, like economic cooperation with farmers who'll transmit these values to the next generation."

Ferrero fondly remembers a time years ago, when he and Baussan went hiking together in the hills of north Provence. Walking across the Valensole plateau and Montagne de Lure, the young men looked over the countryside that was sprawled out below them in all its patchwork glory. When the pair stopped for a well-earned rest, they lay on the ground, looked up at the sky, and imagined how they might recreate the smell of Provence – and how they might bottle it.

And, after all these years, it seems they actually have. This month sees the release of L'Occitane Certified Organic Lavender Eau de Toilette, a soft, powdery scent with notes of grains, lemon and vanilla. It's a true fragrance, with an alcohol base, as opposed to being an oil-based product.

Creating this scent has been a huge learning experience for Ferrero and his team, as the notes don't blend in the same way when you don't have any synthetics at your disposal. But the idea was to create an ambience. "Like a sunset on the Valensole plateau, among the lavender and wheat," he explains.

And that it does. For the virtual traveller, it's the perfect French fix, confirming again that L'Occitane really is Provence in a bottle. **SM**

L'Occitane Certified Organic Lavender Eau de Toilette, \$69.95 (100ml) is in stores now.