

Scent of a Woman?

YOU'D BE SURPRISED. CHANDLER BURR PUTS HIS NOSE TO THE PETAL.

A woman next to me at a dinner party in Paris a few months ago had on one of the great fragrances, the kind of classic that people just keep buying and wearing. It worked perfectly on her, complementing the gorgeous, ultrafeminine Galliano shirt she was wearing. (She turned out to be Sophie Charbonneau, who manages the Dior shops on Rue Faubourg-St.-Honoré and Rue Royale.) It was the smell of opaqueness and clarity mixed together, light and dark folded into each other. And the fragrance was — I confirmed it during the salad course — Eau Sauvage, one of Dior's great masculine scents.

As the roles of women have changed and multiplied over the last century, the idea of what is feminine has become a much more interesting question. Like women's clothes and hairstyles, perfume can now be feminine in surprising ways, or masculine without making straight men worry that they're playing "The Crying Game."

Take Miss Dior, a classic scent created in 1947 for an upper-class woman leading a seamless existence. You, on the other hand, have to calibrate your perfume to the E at rush hour, your office in Midtown and the dinner party uptown. You can wear Miss Dior and make an impression at Lincoln Center. Or you can go from orchestra pit to tennis court in Vera Wang, an equally feminine scent, developed for the 21st century. It has the simple self-assurance of a well-washed polo shirt.

I know that lots of people will argue that feminine still means flowery. O.K., well, consider this: a Christmas party on Varick Street. The host introduces me to four friends. Two women, two men. Hello, hi, how are you?



Someone is wearing . . . I can't quite place it, but I really like it. I lean toward them (they all know what I write about) and inhale. It turns out that Sarah is wearing Michael Kors for Women, which stumped me precisely because its sweet flowers have the slight powder of metal, the faintest trace of steel dust, to give you the Kors modernism. It could be a woman's scent, but you could also see how it could be a man's.

One of the most wonderful florals, by Molyneux, is Quartz, a fragrance of simple loveliness and grace marked by a quality of absolute lucidity. Molyneux markets it as quintessentially female. But a roommate of mine in boarding school, a football-playing jock, sprayed some on as a joke (I had a bottle of it just because I love it), and later hunted me

down and muttered, "Man, where can I get that stuff?" He claimed to have been nuzzled by five cuties in English class.

Many houses make no secret that their "masculines" are worn by women. Women wear everything from Givenchy Pour Homme to Dior's Fahrenheit. I sometimes think more women wear Guerlain's Vetiver than its intended customers do.

Meanwhile, what constitutes "feminine" is expanding beyond all known boundaries. For example, Dolce & Gabbana's Light Blue is an absolutely terrific perfume, rich without a trace of heaviness, sweet without a hint of stickiness. It smells like the freshest lemon-cake batter. Ever. Narciso Rodriguez's For Her smells like talcum powder and confectioner's sugar sprinkled over slightly unripe plums sitting on an aluminum plate. It was co-created by the perfumer Francis Kurkdjian, who earmarked it as feminine and yet made it just mysterious enough to succeed at androgyny.

Simply, from Clinique, is the smell of strong English breakfast tea with cream and sugar; it's one of the most brilliant feminines around. But don't take my word. Go smell it. As for Donna Karan for Women, I've heard she wanted the smell of "clean." Of course, perfect cleanness smells like nothing at all. What she actually got is the smell of *pho*, the Vietnamese soup, with its rich broth of fresh mints and succulent green leaves whose name I can never remember. Let me be clear: it doesn't smell like food exactly. Rather, it smells like the idea of this rich, tangy thing. It isn't going after the elegance of Vera Wang, nor the delight of For Her, nor the light luxury of Simply. It is entirely its own, the essence of femininity. Whatever that is. ■



XX marks the scent: from left, Dior Fahrenheit, Clinique Simply, Guerlain Vetiver, Miss Dior, Donna Karan, Eau Sauvage from Christian Dior and Dolce & Gabbana Light Blue.