

# FRESH SCENT

A swell of new, fine fragrance brands are touting their natural origins. Is clean fragrance taking off? **By ELLEN THOMAS**



**CLEAN BEAUTY IS** catching up with the fragrance category.

Some of the newest brands in fragrance are now entering retailers touting formulations that are either green—made with entirely naturally derived ingredients—or clean, formulated with a blend of botanicals and “safe” synthetics.

At Credo Beauty, chief operating officer Annie Jackson says she’s seen a significant uptick in customer interest in fine fragrance this year, and she’s subsequently built out the category, adding brands such as Phlur and Abbott NYC to her roster. In addition, Credo announced in September its new fragrance transparency policy, requiring its brands to, at a minimum, identify the source of the fragrances they use in products.

Sephora, too, has a dedicated clean section in its fragrance category, highlighting perfumes and candles from brands such as Maison Louis Marie, Ellis Brooklyn, Clean Reserve, Skylar, By Rosie Jane and 7 Virtues.

It’s still early, so there are little numbers to support the growth of clean and natural fragrances—though some of that growth may be fueling the advancement of the overall fragrance category, which was up 4 percent at the end of 2018, to \$4.3 billion. The jump in sales was attributed to niche and artisanal, the category in which many clean and natural brands live.

“It’s a small category with a lot of growth,” says Linda Levy, president of the Fragrance Foundation, of clean and natural fragrance. “There’s a very strong interest in knowing what ingredients are, and if consumers don’t have the education, they are seeking it to see if clean or natural is advantageous. It certainly seems attractive to them.”

Interest in clean and natural fragrance has only recently begun to pick up. When perfumer Douglas Little launched his fine fragrance brand Heretic at Barneys New York in 2016, “There was really no interest in it whatsoever,” he says of the clean category. That’s changed quickly. Little’s retail area at New York’s In Goop Health summit in April was consistently swarmed with customers sampling perfumes composed entirely of natural ingredients such as Florgasm, \$165 for a 150-ml. bottle.

## AU NATURAL

Here, new fragrances on the market touting clean and natural.



Atelier Cologne Patchouli Riviera, \$135 for 100-ml.



Cultus Artem Poeticus, \$580 for 50-ml.



Thin Wild Mercury Whisky 1969, \$165 for 50-ml.



Heretic Dirty Mango, \$165 for 50-ml.



Abbott NYC Shelter Island, \$75 for 50-ml.

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As consumer interest in clean beauty has grown, so has interest in Heretic, Little says. Blair Lawson, formerly Goop's chief merchandising officer, joined the brand as chief operating officer this year. The business is small but growing aggressively, on track to hit \$15 million in sales in the next three years.

Like in the general category of clean beauty, defining clean and "natural" in regards to fragrance is a pain point for brands. Two camps seem to be emerging—brands that use only ingredients sourced from nature, and brands that use a combination of what they refer to as safe synthetics alongside natural ingredients. As with other beauty categories, there is no universally recognized standard around which synthetics are considered safe and which are not.

Holly Tupper, founder of luxury clean fragrance brand Cultus Artem, which launched at Bergdorf Goodman in September, describes her version of clean fragrance as sitting at the intersection of "safety, transparency and sustainability," which she breaks down in full detail on the brand's web site. "It's kind of faddy to be talking about clean and transparent without defining it in clear terms for the consumer to understand," Tupper says.

Another line of thinking some brands are adopting is to avoid the clean conversation entirely. Thin Wild Mercury, created by husband-and-wife team Cathleen Cardinali and Anthony Polcino, is a new line of Los Angeles-inspired scents composed of natural materials and some safe synthetics. "It concerns me that clean is used in a broad term," Cardinali says. "We're not talking about being clean—you lose the personality and the artistry and it becomes your only message."

It's hard to focus only on the clean message when you look at the cost of Cultus Artem's artisanal scents, which sit at the ultra-luxury end of the pricing spectrum—a 50-ml. of tobacco and cumin-laced Poeticus, for example, is \$580. Using natural ingredients is expensive, according to Tupper, but worth it for her to avoid the "freight train" of synthetic scents. A former Eighties-era Wall Streeter, Tupper recalls seeing a sign posted outside the elevator of her office building that read, "No Giorgio Allowed." "Fragrances became so strong [in that era]—I found them to be unattractive."

Little, who estimates he spends \$1,000 to \$2,500 per pound of raw material versus \$100 to \$250 per pound for non-raw material, composes his scents entirely from natural ingredients for the same reason as Tupper. "I find the majority of synthetic materials are not as nuanced [as natural]," he says.

Prices like Tupper's are on the higher end of luxury, and are likely a harbinger of what is to come in the luxury fragrance market. "Ultra-natural" could be the new "ultra-luxe, cultivating the rarest of ingredients with a price tag to match," according

to a recent Mintel report on the future of fragrance.

Two Millennial guys—not perfumers by trade, just fragrance aficionados—have taken this concept and translated it in an affordable way for their peers. Friends Jose Alvarez and Michael Pass, a former Wall Street banker and M&A lawyer, founded unisex fragrance brand Abbott NYC three years ago. Both men had worn fragrance as teenagers, says Alvarez, "but we both got turned off by the cheesiness," and later in life wore niche brands like Byredo and Le Labo, but were again turned off when those brands gained traction and became ubiquitous.

Their scents, a blend of "botanical ingredients and safe synthetics" are inspired by the pair's shared love of outdoor adventures. Abbott started as a direct-to-consumer brand, but is now entering brick-and-mortar retail, including Credo, where it launched in September.

Alvarez and Pass abide by EU regulations when formulating fragrances. "If there's an ingredient known to have possible harmful effects on humans or the environment, we don't use it. Any known carcinogens, we stay away from," Alvarez says.

Despite lots of brand launches in the niche arena, natural is a focus for big brands, too. L'Oréal-owned Atelier Cologne is one of them. The brand has spent the last year re-marketing its scents to highlight their naturality—all of its fragrances are composed of a blend of ingredients that are 96 percent natural or higher, and have been since their inception.

"We knew from the beginning we wanted to use the real raw materials as often as we possibly can, only using a synthetic accord when it wasn't available in its natural form, like musk," says Gerard Camme, president of Atelier Cologne. "When the original decision was made, we weren't really thinking about the clean beauty thing. We did it because we thought we'd get better formulas."

Then came the L'Oréal acquisition three years ago. "We feared they were going to tell us that we had to change our formulas, but when the results came back from the lab, they said to us [excitedly], 'Do you realize you have ingredients [of primarily] natural origin?'"

The French beauty giant, seeing the rise in clean beauty, this year mandated seals displaying the percentage of natural ingredients, on all of Atelier Cologne's outer packaging. The feedback from consumers has been overwhelmingly positive, Camme says.

"Maybe in the past, the customer might not have cared about ingredients in perfume—when you put the natural connotation, someone would have thought of essential oils, and it might not have been seen as positive. When we put [our seals] out there, that notion was dispelled. They tell us point-blank, 'It's nice to be able to buy a perfume as natural as yours.'"