

*Halston*, Netflix's new series, imagines how the designer created *Halston*, his spectacularly successful 1975 fragrance. Grin or groan at the screenwriter's fiction, the truth is much more interesting. Here is the real *Halston* story, an excerpt from *AMERICAN LEGENDS*, Michael Edwards' new book coming out in Fall 2023. Twenty years in research, it traces the evolution of American perfumery thru forty legendary fragrances.

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By 1972, Halston's business was grossing nearly \$30 million in retail sales. That year, he won his fourth Coty Award and was acclaimed by *Women's Wear Daily* as "one of the greats".

The elegance of the new American style was never more evident than at the couture show mounted in November 1973 to raise funds for the restoration of the Palace of Versailles. Five American designers - Bill Blass, Stephen Burrows, Halston, Anne Klein and Oscar de la Renta - joined five French couturiers in presenting their collections. The French used elaborate backdrops and props. The Americans used a bare stage and ten Black models. Their spare elegance put the French to shame.

In late 1973, in a move that stunned the fashion industry, Halston sold his name, his company and his design services to David Mahoney of Norton Simon for sixteen million dollars.

Norton Simon Inc. was one of the conglomerates stitched together in the 1960s. It owned such diverse interests as Hunt Food, Somerset Liquor, Avis Car Rental, Hartman Luggage and McCall Patterns. "We had also just bought the Max Factor cosmetic company," said Dan Moriarty, then assistant to chairman of the board David Mahoney. "Max Factor was number two to Revlon, but its department store business was limited by what *Women's Wear Daily* called a 'tacky, Hollywood image.' A designer fragrance could be the tool to solve the image problem. Other designers were considered but Halston was the king."

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# 1975

To provide Halston with the necessary executive structure, Norton Simon appointed Michael Lichtenstein, a lawyer, as managing director of the new division. In his early forties, low key and even-tempered, Lichtenstein provided Halston with a corporate cocoon. “My brief was very simple. I was to get the fragrance out of Halston and into the marketplace,” he says. “As a division, Halston was really too small for Norton Simon to care whether or not it made money. It had been bought for the prestige. When I arrived, Halston had reached an impasse with the Max Factor people who had been developing his fragrance. They resented his iron determination to control every creative decision. Some there would have loved to see the perfume die. So they put a young, inexperienced marketing manager named Joe Forkish to run the project.”

Not quite that inexperienced, retorts Forkish: “I had had two years’ experience as a sales administrator at Revlon on *Norell* (1968), *Réplique* (1947) and the *Balmain* fragrances and three years more as a marketing manager for *Ultima* fragrances. I was also the only one at Factor who understood anything about fragrance packaging and product. But it is true that few at Max Factor expected the fragrance to succeed.

To everyone’s surprise, including his own, Joe Forkish turned out to have a good nose. “Young and brash as he was, Joe was the man who put *Halston* together,” says Lichtenstein.

Halston had already been introduced to IFF, a major fragrance supplier, by Lily Auchinclose, a client who was also the daughter of IFF’s founder, Arnold van Ameringen. “The perfumers ran us through a little school for a day and a half to explain their vocabulary to us,” recalls Lichtenstein. “Halston and I knew nothing about perfume creation. I sat at his elbow for no purpose other than to take notes. It was fascinating but difficult for Halston. He smoked so heavily, I was surprised he could smell anything!”

It was at this point that Forkish shuttled between Los Angeles and New York. “I found Halston interesting because he understood quality but had no conception of marketing,” he says. “For him, quality was the only issue and the only thing that would satisfy him was something great.

“In addition to IFF, I also briefed Roure Bertrand Dupont, Firmenich and Givaudan to work on two directions: the first a white floral, and the second a woody note.”

From the start, IFF had the inside edge because of Lily Auchinclose’s connections. It helped that chief perfumer Bernard Chant also admired Halston’s work. “I studied his fashions, his style and his image before conceiving a suitable theme,” he said. “He would come in to smell the fragrance as it progressed.”

“Halston was a very sensitive personality, sensitive to the nuances and people around him,” says Lichtenstein. “Chant was a very straightforward man, quite unaffected, quiet and a great expert. And he had a vision, a vision of a haunting woody fragrance with green notes. And Halston liked it.”

“Instead of working through the account executives, I worked directly with Bernard Chant,” says Forkish. “We became very close. I would even go to his house on weekends to work on the fragrance. It took us a good seven or eight months to develop the perfume.

“Bernard Chant asked me to contribute on the Halston brief,” says perfumer Max Gavarry, who worked out of IFF’s office in Paris. “Bernard was looking for a new kind of woody chypre, quite different, for instance, from the patchouli accord of *Aromatics Elixir* (1971). At that time, chypres were very successful – it was the era of *Calandre* (1969) and *Empreinte* (1971). But I felt that they were a bit too hard, a bit masculine. I wanted to make something more feminine – less woody, less of a classical chypre.”

Gavarry referred to a previous accord he had created. “I came to show Bernard a formula called *Madame*, which I’d worked on after studying *Badedas* bath oil. *Madame* contrasted aldehydes, geranium and rose with green notes, a fruity peach accent and a big quantity of *Iso Cyclemone E*, a new product from IFF research. I used the new material to replace the classic violet, woody effect of methyl ionone. When blended with rose, I found *Iso Cyclemone E* to be very feminine.”

Patented in 1973, *Iso Cyclemone E*, later souped up to *Iso E Super*, has a light but pervasive cedarwood note that intrigued Chant. “Bernard told me the story of how he first came to understand the impact of *Iso Cyclemone E*,” said John Dennis, IFF’s Halston account executive. “Intrigued by the new material, he added a few drops to the *Halston* trial. Even at that light dose, it pushed up all the flowers and gave the fragrance the distinction and signature that made the difference. In my opinion, *Iso Cyclemone E* made *Halston* what it was.”

IFF perfumer Carlos Benaïm agrees. “It was the imaginative use of *Iso E Super* that allowed Bernard to bring in a major new woody note to the chypre accord. That note gave *Halston* its signature.”

It was *Halston*’s overdose of *Iso E Super* that so intrigued perfumer Steven Claisse. “The new molecule brought a velvety, musky, woody signature to *Halston* that was more complex than any cedarwood or sandalwood, patchouli or vetiver note. *Iso E Super* was an interesting new molecule but to perfumers, it was the extraordinary level of its overdose in *Halston* that was revolutionary at the time.”

Forkish fell for *Iso E Super* at first whiff. “Bernard showed me pure *Iso Cyclemone E* saying, ‘What do you think about this? I’ve been playing with this ingredient for a long time’. My reply was quick: ‘It’s fabulous’. ‘Well, no one will use it’, he said. When he added that no one had used it before, I became even more enamored because I was looking for a signature that would make people immediately say, ‘This is *Halston*!’. Gradually, I lost interest in the white floral accord, which was our first direction.”



*Bernard Chant:* © Louie Psihoyos

With *Madame* as a starting point, Chant and Gavarry incorporated *Iso E Super* into a fresh, fruity chypre accord. “Bernard was very strongly influenced by mossy, woody notes,” says Benaïm. “*Cabochard*, which Bernard created in 1959, was a masterpiece. In a way, its accord influenced much of his work. In *Halston*, it’s part of the background but the top note is much more novel, an accord of marigold and chamomile. The heart is very floral, full of the rich natural materials Bernard loved.”

*Halston* was enthusiastic about the woody chypre accords Forkish showed him. The prospect of using an entirely new raw material thrilled the designer. “It was a fantastic break for us. It makes the perfume smell like nobody else’s,” *Halston* later told author Steven Gaines. But in private, he pressed Forkish to finish the fragrance. “He became impatient with the time we were taking,” says Forkish. “*Halston* was a genius at packaging, but he really had little feel for fragrance. We couldn’t rush it. When a perfumer is using a new ingredient, he needs time to get its balance right.

“Bernard seemed to backtrack. He became very frustrated with the development. I sensed he was being held back by his management. Perhaps they were reluctant to let me use *Iso Cyclemone E*, because the company wasn’t sure that *Halston* would prove a big enough fragrance to introduce it.”

It was a shrewd assessment. A new raw material such as *Iso E Super* costs millions of dollars to develop. If introduced correctly, it will pique the interest of the big household product giants, whose products require thousands of tons of fragrance. If the launch product fizzles, their interest too may fade.

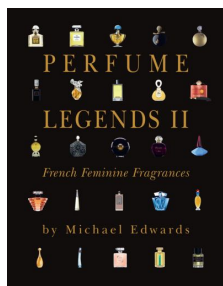
Faced with the impasse, Forkish asked to see IFF chairman Henry Walter: “Hank was a gruff, New York lawyer, an extremely tough and very smart businessperson. I came straight out: ‘This isn’t working.’ I explained the marketing strategy, saying, ‘I want a piece of Halston fashion couture that I can sell for the price of a spray cologne. If it is couture, it is a signature piece, which means it must be a signature fragrance, which means you have got to stop giving me all these submissions that smell like everybody else’s fragrances. If your company can’t do it, then I want to part ways, because I can’t take it anymore. I know about Halston’s connection with the family who owns this company and if you want to tell them you can’t do it, be my guest.’ I was really a very spoilt kid! Hank, to his credit, made an immediate decision: ‘We’ll do it!’ he told me. ‘Bernard, give him whatever he wants.’ And from that point on – and it took about four months to get to that point - we really worked the fragrance.”

Chant had a particular talent for finishing fragrances. “So often, Bernard would put the ten per cent finishing touch that turned a good fragrance into a work of art,” said Eugene Grisanti, who succeeded Walter as IFF’s chairman.

“Bernard brought up some of the green notes and played with some of the chypre notes to make it smoother,” Forkish recalls. “Close to the end, an idea struck me. ‘Could we use a touch of vanilla to smooth it?’ I asked. ‘Not the usual scent of vanilla, but the icy-cold smoother scent you smell when you open the lid of a gallon of vanilla ice cream.’ We bought a gallon of ice cream and smelled it together. ‘That’s vanillin you’re smelling’, Bernard said. He added a touch of vanillin and then a touch more ... up to two point two per cent. The whole fragrance became very mellow. And that is why some people say *Halston* has an oriental note, because vanillin has an oriental signature.

In an interview with Gaines, Halston recalled that he had “smelt hundreds and hundreds of perfumes. While Halston was willing to comment on the submissions, he refused to judge them. “It’s women who must decide, because they are going to wear it,” he said. According to his secretary, “he would have the models wear the different scents, to see how they smelt on different skins.”

One incident convinced Halston that the fragrance was finally ready. “He was dining in a restaurant one evening when Charles Revson stopped by his table,” says Lichtenstein. “Halston’s companion was wearing the near-to-final selection. ‘That’s a lovely fragrance you have on,’ Revson remarked. Halston was quite pleased because Charles Revson was considered the great maven of perfumes.”



Michael Edwards is a fragrance historian and expert. He is the author of *PERFUME LEGENDS: FRENCH FEMININE FRAGRANCES* and the *FRAGRANCES OF THE WORLD* reference guide, now in its thirty-third edition. [www.fragrancesoftheworld.com](http://www.fragrancesoftheworld.com)