



Scents



Sensibility

Creative scent designers are shaking up California's Bay Area perfume scene with offerings that are as heady as they are esoteric - including a line that takes inspiration from individuals' unique auras, aromatherapy meditation classes and a *Game of Thrones*-inspired men's cologne that marries the smells of bay rum and stargazer lily

By Megan McCrea
Photography Aubrie Pick

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heets of rain pound the roof, but the women inside the high-ceilinged, sweet-smelling The Archery – a creative space on the edge of San Francisco's Mission District – don't seem to mind. Some crowd around the eggnog-making demonstration, bright-red Negronis in hand. Others plop down on the concrete floor to arrange poppies, lilies and gardenias in Mason jars.

Meanwhile, I'm sitting in a folding chair between arrangements of roses and plumerias, and Yosh Han is staring at me – her head tilted back, purple-hued lids closed. "Wow," she murmurs. "You're very complicated." Several minutes later, her eyes flutter open and words begin tumbling out in her melodious, comforting alto. "I see two separate pictures for you," she begins. "In one, you're walking through this giant freezer, and it's frozen all around you..."

Over the next 10 minutes, Han leads me on a tour of my psyche – through hopes, fears, worries and dreams. I laugh; I cry; she sketches my aura in colored pencil. When I stand to leave, she hands me the portrait – my body surrounded in concentric circles and jags of burnt orange, moss green, teal and lilac. "Based on your aura, I'd recommend the Stargazer," she says, before slipping me a small gray box emblazoned with gold lettering – an aura-inspired perfume recommendation.

For Han, a clairvoyant and fragrance designer, scent and soul go hand in hand. "I've always had a very spiritual angle to what I do," she later explains from her workshop at Tigerlily Perfumery, a cozy shop near The Archery. "Each fragrance has been attuned with one of the chakras, and I match fragrances with people's energies."

To do that, Han will recommend a fragrance based on a customer's aura reading. Or, if they so choose, she'll create a custom perfume just for them. Han crafts her scents using many ingredients – including some that her customers might not think they like. Her method is simple –

to craft the perfect fragrance for someone, Han will combine a scent they love with a certain "x-factor". "This often takes the form of the scent of something that they are repulsed by, because we tend to resist the thing that we need the most," she says.

The magic happens when she puts these two pieces together. "When you combine something that is beautiful with something that is unexpected, that's when you have a masterpiece – a blend that just sings," she beams. "It speaks to that vulnerable part of you and resonates with your heart."

Han is a former florist, and many of her scents incorporate different floral notes. In particular, White Flowers – Han's big, bold, jasmine-tinged fragrance – pays tribute to the days she spent as a flower arranger. "I just love the smell of freshly cut flowers," Han explains. "When you walk into the cooler, all the white flowers and green notes are frozen here. Merely opening the door provides a refreshing jolt."

While Han could have stuck with using strictly flower essences, she decided to add other elements to White Flowers – giving the fragrance greater depth and complexity. "My mother is an *ikebana* master, a Japanese flower arranger," says Han, "so she taught me that a flower arrangement isn't just about the blooms. It's about the stems, leaves, roots and placement in the vessel."

Han considered that ratio while blending White Flowers. She incorporated an earthy element using petitgrain – an essential oil extracted from the leaves and green twigs of bitter orange – as a nod to the leaves and branches. The "white flowers", meanwhile, are a veritable who's who of the garden: jasmine, violet, gardenia, tuberose and lily of the valley. "White Flowers is a very unapologetic fragrance," Han says. "It reminds me of springtime in full bloom."

Across the San Francisco Bay in the college town of Berkeley, Mandy Aftel – the perfumer behind Aftelier Perfumes – also takes creative cues from the seasons. "I





THIS SPREAD

Yosh Han – a fragrance designer and clairvoyant – prescribes perfumes based on a customer's aura, which she ascertains through a personalized aura reading



THIS SPREAD

Mandy Aftel – the perfumer behind Aftelier Perfumes – has been crafting unique scents for over two decades

grew up in Michigan," Aftel recalls, "and I love the experience of observing the seasons changing – the air turning crisp in autumn, the first snow of winter. To me, that's what's exciting about creating a perfume. It's an experience I've had that I pass to someone – a message in a bottle."

Aftel has been passing messages for more than two decades now, both in bottles and on the page. She has written seven books and, in 2001, published *Essence & Alchemy: A Natural History of Perfume* that kick-started the natural perfume movement and solidified her place in the industry. Aptly, Aftel wound up in the fragrance industry by way of the literary world.

After writing her self-help book *The Story of Your Life*, she became interested in penning a novel. "I thought I'd write a story with a perfumer as the main character," she reveals. "As part of my research, I started collecting turn-of-the-century books on perfume. As I read them, I found myself getting more and more interested."

Eventually, I ended up taking a perfume class as part of my research and just fell in love with the materials."

Aftel's light-filled workshop attests to her passion for the raw components that go into scent design. A rainbow of bottles in all



shapes and sizes lines the front window, labels promising whiffs of spearmint, rosemary and sweet-smelling geranium. The surrounding redwood bookshelves are lined with tomes both brand new and well worn: *The Essence of Beauty, A Romance of Perfume Lands, Fragrance Chemistry: The Science of the Sense of Smell*.

As these titles suggest, perfumery is both art and science. According to Dr Rachel S. Herz of Brown University, smells speak directly to us because of how our brains are wired. "The connections between the olfactory area and the amygdala and hippocampus" – the parts of the brain that handle emotion and memory – "are more direct than the connections between these brain areas and any other sense," she writes.

Not only is there a close connection between smell and thought, but we couldn't censor smells even if we wanted to. "Close



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your eyes. Plug your ears," says Dr Zoran Kuzmanovich of Davidson College in North Carolina. "The outside world is cut off. But we cannot censor input from our nose, at least if we wish to go on breathing normally. Our sense of smell taps into our emotions because it is the uncensored sense."

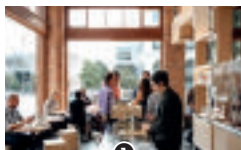
Like Han, Aftel creates specific scents for her label, as well as custom fragrances. And while she has studied fragrance with near-academic devotion, each of her scents comes from a place of creativity. "I usually start with a feeling," she explains, "and with two essences as anchor points."

For instance, her newest scent, Amber Tapestry, pairs jasmine and labdanum – the natural world's version of amber. "I wanted to make something very soft, warm and comforting, kind of like cashmere and the feeling of being enveloped," Aftel explains. "The amber and jasmine notes seamlessly lock together, so it doesn't seem really floral – just rich."

San Francisco-based scent designer Michael "Mik" Coyle also appreciates the ability of fragrances to bring comfort to the

SMELLS LIKE EXTREME SPIRIT

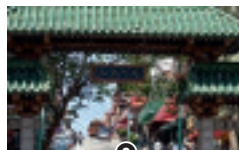
From the rich aroma of coffee to the salty scent of the ocean, here are a few places to get a whiff of some of the best smells that San Francisco can offer



1

Blue Bottle Coffee

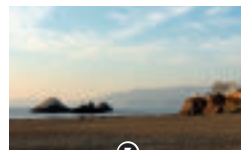
The bold smell of coffee – freshly roasted, freshly ground, freshly poured – pervades this light-filled temple to the bean. Over the past 15 years, the Oakland-born coffee shop has opened outposts in SF, NY, LA and Tokyo. Grab one of their legendary pour-over coffees, and see what all the fuss is about. bluebottlecoffee.com



2

Chinatown

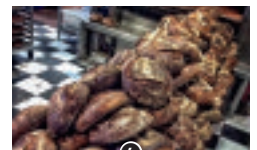
For a whirlwind olfactory tour, head to Chinatown's main drag, Stockton Street. Sweet, fresh-cooked ducks hang in restaurant windows, while buttery notes drift from the neighborhood bakeries. Visit Ting How Temple, a lantern-lit Taoist temple fragrant with rich, spicy incense. sanfranciscochina town.com



3

Ocean Beach

Joggers, surfers and romantics flock to Ocean Beach, a 5.5km ribbon of white sand running along the city's western border, adjacent to Golden Gate Park. Here, whiffs of sand and sunscreen hover in the salty air. Come evening, bonfires spring up along the beach, lending a smoky campfire note. parksconservancy.org



4

Tartine

In food-worshipping San Francisco, Tartine remains the holiest of holy sites. But don't mind the long line outside. Instead, think of the wait as a chance to decide between a morning bun, lemon tart and *pain au chocolat* – while savoring the comforting scent of fresh-baked bread as it wafts out the open door. tartinebakery.com



wearer. During his time as an aromatherapy student, he was fascinated by some of the exotic ingredients he encountered. "I came across ylang-ylang [perfume extracted from the South-East Asian cananga tree] and I couldn't believe the psychological effect it was having on people," he recalls. "It's almost classified among the narcotics of florals because of its ability to calm the body and slow the breathing." As he noticed just how many scents were associated with healing, he realized that he could use these smells to create "perfume with purpose."

Aside from selling his creations under the MIKMOI label, Coyle also crafts bespoke scents and has even launched a novel guided meditation class structured around fragrance. Before these classes begin, he takes a scent with 10 ingredients and deliberately breaks it down into three parts. Then, as the students in the room meditate in corpse pose, he walks around with a fan spritzed with the fragrance, and describes each of the individual notes. "There's ylang-ylang, frankincense, bergamot, lavender – all ingredients selected for a focused mind and calm," Coyle says.

With this class, Coyle is tapping into ancient practices. "Almost everything we





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Other than creating scents for his MIKMOI label, Michael "Mik" Coyle also runs guided meditation classes structured around fragrance; For his Knight of Flowers fragrance, he took inspiration from *Game of Thrones*

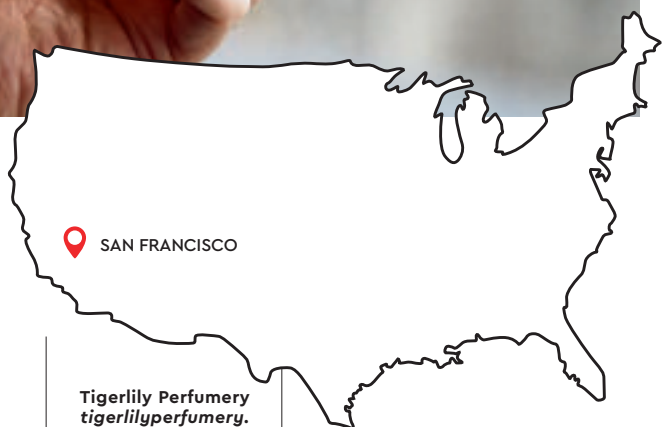
know about aromatherapy goes back to the Ancient Romans," explains Erin Branham, manager of School and Teacher Programs at The J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles. Even the scented fan that Coyle wields descended from the ancients. "There was a Roman senator who would perfume the wings of birds and have the birds fly through the house during a party," Branham explains. "It would spread the scent throughout the entire space."

For one new fragrance, Coyle even took inspiration from – albeit fictional – medieval times. "In *Game of Thrones*," he explains, referencing the popular HBO television series, "they had a gay knight character." Some of the other characters on the show mocked the knight for his homosexuality, calling him the "Knight of Flowers".

Realizing that "Knight of Flowers" would make a perfect fragrance name, Coyle got to work on a scent that combined bay rum – an old-school men's cologne – with the scent of stargazer lily to create a masculine floral aroma. "The stargazer lily is not an easy flower to replicate," he says. "So I was just buying stargazers – bundles of them, vases of them, week after week."

It took seven ingredients, 10 months and 17 versions, but Coyle finally nailed it. "It wasn't that I was looking for photo realism, or aromatic realism," he explains. "But I love the smell. There's almost a bubblegum note to it, which just takes you back to your purest youthful form, right? Because I can't imagine anything better than Bazooka gum."

As I inhale the sweet scent of Stargazer, neither can I.



Tigerlily Perfumery
tigerlilyperfumery.com

YOSH
eaudeyosh.com

Aftelier Perfumes
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MIKMOI
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