

WHAT'S IN A FLOWER?

MAURICE ROUCEL and DOMINIQUE ROPION have spent their careers creating some of the most celebrated scents of our time. But a brief from Korean brand Nonfiction gave them the unexpected opportunity to explore the lesser-known facets of a single flower. The master perfumers reflect on the boundless possibilities and nostalgic emotions tied to florals.

Words: MADELAINE CLARK



Maurice Roucel and Dominique Ropion

Few in the beauty business can claim an oeuvre as dazzling and celebrated as that of Maurice Roucel and Dominique Ropion. For the past four decades the French master perfumers have composed some of the best-selling and cult-favourite scents of our time, along the way earning a reputation as the go-to olfactory masterminds for revered luxury brands and perfume houses wanting to create the next fragrant sensation. And though their names might not be household outside the industry, you'd be hard-pressed to find someone who hasn't, at some point, come into contact with their creations – or even owned one.

Take, for example, Ropion's greatest hits, including Calvin Klein's Euphoria, Pure Poison by Dior, Mugler Alien, Rabanne's Lady Million, or Viktor & Rolf Flowerbomb, which between them dominated billboards, TV adverts and duty-free malls from the '90s onwards. He's also the mastermind behind luxury masterpieces Portrait of a Lady and The Night by Frederic Malle, the former having one of the highest concentrations of Turkish rose on the market.

"A successful perfume today is a delicate

balance between emotional resonance, olfactory signature and wearability," says Ropion of the elusive formula. "It's not just about creating something beautiful; it's about creating a scent that tells a story, evokes a feeling and resonates with the person who wears it."

And speaking of resonating, who doesn't recall the '90s when there wasn't a single teenage girl who didn't want to own DKNY Be Delicious? The man behind the fruity blossom scent is Roucel, who was also responsible for Gucci Envy, Guerlain Insolence and Frederic Malle's Musc Ravageur, as well as collaborations with Le Labo, Marc Jacobs and Serge Lutens. "You can't plan for a hit; you create something you believe in," he says of his blockbuster abilities. "I think it's about honesty and instinct more than market logic."

Just when Ropion and Roucel had all but conquered the world of perfumery, last year they received an unusual brief from Korean perfume and skincare brand Nonfiction (whose Hong Kong boutique recently opened on Hollywood Road). Founder Haeyoung Cha – who, despite a hyper-competitive market, has achieved remarkable

success since establishing the company in 2019 – asked the perfumers to create two scents each for the newest Nonfiction collection, The Flowers.

Although Ropion and Roucel have spent their careers experimenting with some of the rarest and highest concentrations of floral notes, the brief from Nonfiction was altogether different. Cha invited them to explore lesser-known characteristics of floral ingredients, presenting new dimensions to single flowers and proving their boundless possibilities. The perfumers each developed two eaux de parfum with a focus on a single ingredient: rose, iris, ylang-ylang and wildflower.

"The brief from Nonfiction centred around the concept of 'unexpected flowers', which immediately resonated with me," explains Ropion, who created Iris Concrete and Bois D'Ylang. "It invited a creative exploration of floral ingredients that are either under-used in modern perfumery or possess hidden facets waiting to be revealed. Rather than relying on the familiar, the goal was to surprise and delight through unconventional olfactory experiences."

Ropion, who first collaborated with

Nonfiction on a project for the 2024 Venice Biennale, believes the Korean market “is increasingly drawn to more daring and sophisticated fragrances”, so he immediately knew he wanted to work with “versatile and complex” iris and ylang-ylang.

For Iris Concrete, Ropion wanted to shift the flower’s soft and powdery reputation, challenging its long-time associations with vintage and classical perfumes. He recalls first being captivated by the perfumer’s palette version of iris, “which requires several years of patience for the fragrant compounds to develop”, while studying at the Roure school in Grasse. The starting point was reducing the powdery properties of iris by blending sweet ambrette seed and a base note of soft musk before introducing a greener edge via middle notes of bitter-sweet galbanum. The resulting floral woody scent is a fresher, more modern take on the typically sweet flower that carries genderless appeal.

And while Iris is linked to classical scents, with Bois D’Ylang he wanted to trade the “rich and heady” ylang-ylang’s connotations

of sensuality and exoticism, instead nuancing its solar and woody dimensions. In the floral woody perfume, the central note of ylang-ylang contrasts with creamy tuberose absolute, while Ropion says the notes of sandalwood and blondwood lend it a more “structured, radiant and modern character”.

As for Roucel’s approach, the perfumer, who began his education in the Chanel laboratory rather than pursuing a formal education, was influenced by his non-conventional background. “My path into perfumery has always been quite instinctive and emotional rather than purely academic,” he says. “Starting out in a chemistry lab gave me a deep respect for the raw materials and the technical side of creation, but above all it taught me to trust my senses and my curiosity. I rely on my intuition and on capturing emotions rather than simply following trends or formulas.” For the Nonfiction brief he created The Rose and Young Memories, which explore the emotional spectrum of flowers, harnessing their storytelling abilities.

The Rose explores the intimate yet

fleeting emotions tied to a rose opening its petals. “Flowers are so much more than their sweetness or softness,” says Roucel. “They can be green, spicy, raw, or wild. With The Rose, I wanted to bring out all these facets: the crisp, almost citrusy brightness of fresh petals, but also the honeyed, spicy depth of the absolute. The challenge is to translate not just the smell but the feeling, the sensation when you bury your nose in a flower and are transported somewhere else.” As if capturing the breaths in a flower’s bloom, the first impressions of the floral woody scent are notes of cool geranium and vibrant red berries, next rose absolute blends with velvety sandalwood and musk, adding depth and a sensual texture to the perfume, prolonging its presence on the skin – much like how a rose’s scent remains after its gone.

Young Memories bottles the equally evocative, yet very different emotions tied to the arrival of spring. Centred on the wildflower, the nostalgic scent evokes the smells of breeze, sun and nature, as the season changes, conjuring Roucel’s own recollections of running through open fields as a child. With notes of fresh mint, basil, warm and woody cedarwood, and vetiver, the floral green scent perfectly captures the wildflower’s untamed essence. For Roucel, who grew up in the French countryside, the perfume is a personal reflection of his connection to nature.

“My strongest memories are in the countryside,” he says. “Young Memories is about that sense of freedom and innocence that nature has always given me.”

Below: floral ingredients wildflower, rose, and iris, which inspired The Flowers collection



The Rose perfume