

On starting small



Scent artist David Seth Moltz (D.S. & Durga) discusses his DIY beginnings, learning to trust your instincts, and meditation as the foundation for multi-tasking.

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As told to Laura Feinstein, 2678 words.

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You were a musician before discovering perfume and ultimately founding D.S. & Durga. Can you tell me about that journey?

I knew I was going to be a musician. I've always been artistically inclined and felt if I put my mind to anything, I could "figure it out." I could never build a car properly—I'm not handy in that regard—but with art, I've always been able to improvise. As a guitar player and singer, I was in many bands—I toured, got signed, and tried that whole thing. Then I met Kavi while waiting at tables at Pure Food and Wine, the [Bad Vegan](#) restaurant.

No way.

Yeah. I was touring and trying to make it, but I was always interested in the plants growing all around me, even out of the cracks of sidewalks in Brooklyn. As a suburban kid adjusting to living in Brooklyn, it was dirty but I found beauty in the plant life and birds. Kavi and I also began going away on weekends, and I was reading vintage manuals about herbs and gardening. There were always recipes for creams, lotions, and old-fashioned perfumes in the back. I realized, "Oh, I want to make my own stuff." This was in the early aughts when we were all trying to live like it was the 19th century and doing everything DIY.

Our friends had jewelry stores and shoe stores, making all their own things. Food as a "trend" was blowing up with new attention to ingredients, essential oils, and herbs. I started making things, and we gave them away as holiday gifts to friends. They liked it, and Kavi said, "We should start a business." She worked at an architecture firm at the time and suggested, "Oh, I could print the labels on the nice printers there." And I decided, "All right, I'll hand-make everything else." And so we did it. We didn't know exactly what we were doing, but it just exploded.

I remember seeing D.S. & Durga at local indie stores like Bird in the early aughts, many of which sadly no longer exist. This was at the beginning of modern e-commerce, around when Kickstarter was getting off the ground and before Etsy. Even without digital resources or much press, you still quickly developed a cult following.

Someone from *Thrillist* [wrote about us](#) at this time. I didn't even use the internet that much, and certainly not much was sold there. I think Amazon still just sold books. But we had a website, and people could order there, and we got so many inquiries. And then Anthropologie said, "Will you make us a line?" and wholesale ordered like \$26,000 of merch, which was like \$26 million to us. I thought, "This is crazy." We were able to quit our jobs. Then I realized that I could do in fragrance what I was trying to do in music, creating this whole world and discussing historical topics.

And so you just started building a line?

I taught myself how to make fragrance, which is probably the stranger, weirder part of the story. I figured it out by experimenting, writing it all down, and understanding the relationships between aromatic materials. Then I realized, "Oh, I can transition to this." Kavi was an architect, so she knew design essentials and could work on product design, which ultimately came to be known as branding. We didn't know what that word meant back then.

You've come a long way since mixing scents in your apartment. Has anything changed in your process?

We've always been pretty siloed in that I do all the fragrance and all the words, and Kavi does all the design. We have opinions, but there's a level that we stay within since we trust each other. I might have a layman's understanding of design, but she understands why X, Y, and Z can't happen. And the same with fragrance. I just understand, "No, no, this, trust me, this is going to be good. This is the way to do it."

It's incredible to think you started this mini-empire by trying things out.

We started with nothing. We didn't take investments, we funded it ourselves. So all the money kept going back into it. We were living off of it. It was doing well, and we didn't want to change, but we also knew we wouldn't be able to compete with the brands we respected with our basic packaging. Kavi wanted to make something much more beautiful and high-end, so in 2015 we bit the bullet and rebranded at scale. You had to spend so much money on the molding to make custom pieces, but it was great because that's when we *really* launched. We were already at Barneys, but we were able to have a better presence and also to launch at Liberty and Bonmarche.

What changed with the new look?

People took us more seriously. It's important that you make the most beautiful thing you can, highlighting the beauty of the juice inside. They're two parts of the same coin. The other thing is that I realized I was belabored by this old fantasy that we all wanted to live in the 19th century. When that sensibility left my life, I felt so free. Suddenly, I was like, "We can just accept that we are in 2014. And it's okay. You can build beauty around you, but you don't need to reject it." In the beginning, we were intrigued by the way things used to be and were rejecting how far we had gotten as a society. And I think that things took off once we realized you don't have to dress like *Peaky Blinders* to feel free inside.

As a Pixies fan, I love that you have a scent called Debaser. Why did you create this perfume? How did you decide what you wanted its essence to be?

I keep a running list of names and ideas. Sometimes, I'll say, "Oh, it'd be so cool if a thing were named this," then I'll say, "Let me try to make that." Others, I'll make something that's so beautiful and be like, "Huh, this could fit for that idea that I've always had." So they're all different in that regard. Debaser has this big, sexy, but kind of innocent fig fragrance. I was thinking of seventh grade, hanging out with older kids, listening to this provocative music, and how influential it was to me. And how psyched I was to reference the Pixies because I just loved them. That era was so special. We've actually given them some bottles.

What was Black Francis's reaction?

I've seen him talk in interviews and say, "Yeah, there's this brand from Brooklyn that has this Debaser fragrance."

Did he give any notes?

He said he liked it. They were playing in Brooklyn, and our friend knew them a little bit, so she had us backstage. I actually got to meet a few of them.

What is a dream you have?

I mean, I have a lot of them. I have a whole line that I want to make that will change fragrance. For example,

when they created synthesis in computers, you began to see these giant synthesizers - modular synthesizers that were just a million knobs with wires, and almost no one could figure out how to play them live. But the potential was that you could make any sound if you could figure out how to filter a sine wave. And then, in the seventies, Bob Moog decided, "Oh, I can just put these signals and these wires in a certain order and put a keyboard on it. So if anybody can play the keyboard, they could make their own sounds." And he made the first synthesizers with keyboards-the Moog. Then, look at what happened to the music. So, if you look at my perfume wall, it will be hard to tell someone, "Okay, this is how you make a perfume." But I have an idea of how to put the keyboard on it and create a series of things that can work together so people can make their own creations. That's a big dream of mine.

I'm sure you get asked this often, but have you read Perfume?

That's so funny. No, I've never read it, but everyone asks, and I won't because, not out of stubbornness, but I don't know how to describe it. There are so many things in this world that I want to read, and I have no time for things that I don't. If people are mystified by this crazy process of perfume, they're like, "What? You can make a perfume that smells like basketballs?" But I'm beyond thinking that any of this stuff is impossible. All I do is the same thing a painter or a musician does. I'm taking aromatic materials and putting them to make an image or a scent that brings your mind somewhere, just like a musician or a painter does. It's not strange to me that it has the same ability as any other art form. We overanalyze everything in this culture.

But there is something special about how a good perfume makes you feel.

I like to talk about the magic of these things. We're living in a pretty magical universe. There's just so much happening. The mundane is quite magical. The fact that you and I are breathing - each breath is a miracle. And so I think perfume and art forms, in general, sort of reflect God's presence in the universe. They're something that's inherently magical, but I feel like everything is magical.

Have you ever created something that astounded even yourself?

I mean, I try not to have my head too far up my own ass. I'm just executing ideas, and sometimes I'll like it. There are happy accidents. I usually will work on something and then try to "beat it" for up to a few months, and most often, I can't. So it's strange that there's just this time where the thing is the best I can do. You just let it come through you. I think I naturally understand how to represent images and other art forms in fragrance. If I was going to make a dish of food that tasted like a car, I think I could figure out how to do that.

Similarly, some creators, like Jen Monroe, do amazing work with food akin to conceptual art to produce these new worlds. When you taste it, you're transported.

I was writing a book with a chef about this. Because I look at these things as landscapes. You can create a very immersive world in any art form. The thing with perfume and music is they're both invisible, so that's the thing that's extra magic about them. Because visual art is visual art, but with music, there's this whole architecture of a symphony, but you can't see it. And it's the same thing with fragrance.

Do you still have time to do music?

I just came out with a solo album. It's on Spotify under my name. And then I also have this other band, Hiko Men. We haven't played in a while, but we made an album during the pandemic, and I also came out with three poetry books, one per year, for the past three years. So, I'm always working on other artistic endeavors.

How do you keep all these ideas in your head, let alone execute them?

Everything's on my phone. Every single thing I do. In the modern world, there are few inventions I think that are most impactful, and definitely, the Notes function of an iPhone would be high up there for me. Any tiny thought I have can go in there, and it's all organized, whether it's a perfume name, a spiritual thought, or a poem. You

just get it down. When you're going to go back and put it into a book, there are the first drafts. To basically have a notebook for your mind at your fingertips that can't get lost is one of the greatest things that ever happened.

How do you have time to juggle all of this?

You've got to make space and make time in your life. I think meditation is the key to everything. You have to spend some time, just as you would take time to sleep or eat. You have to take time to work on conquering the mind, or going into calmness and peace, because that's a great foundation for everything else.

It's inspiring that you and Kavi are partners in both business and life. Is it hard to choose when you're "at work" versus just in the house cleaning or cooking?

I think that there is no separation anymore. But that's the way for modern life, especially New Yorkers. Everyone's always accessible on their phone. But we don't email our team on the weekends unless it's urgent. We are always kind of available, but it doesn't feel overwhelming. It's just intertwined and doesn't get in the way of our home life. We're not always together during the day, but we're in contact. Maybe some married people don't interact as much during the day because they're busy at work when they get home, that's a special time. But we already know what's been going on, so we don't need to sit down and download each other on the day. We're just getting older too. I think people want to do their own thing at home sometimes.

You feel that collaboration and calm when walking into a DS & Durga store.

I don't know if calm is...but that's good! I mean, we have the concrete, spikes, black, and a little punk look. The concrete is beautiful, though. The coolest thing to me is that the layers of concrete have become a touchpoint. We have it at our little shop, the shop at Bergdorf, and the branch we're opening in LA—lines of beautiful, textured concrete.

Is there any question you wish someone would ask that they never have?

It's funny, people always ask this last question, "Is there anything else?" And I'm like, "You can prompt me endlessly, and I can say stuff, but I'm not trying to say something." But the work speaks for itself, and I'm very available to talk about things when people ask.

David Seth Moltz Recommends

The Sunshine Set, his playlist for 2024.

The DS & Durga Fall Fuming Collection for autumnal vibes.

The Big City Jams collection for armchair travel, from Italy's coastal cities to New York and back.

New England: In the summer, there's no place I'd rather be than New England. The whole town comes alive. Everyone is trying to get to the beach. All day in the water, lazing in the sand, eating at clam shacks. The presence of the Atlantic looms over everything—you smell the salt, the wild roses on the breeze, boat gas, dune grass. The endless day gives way to summer cocktails, strolls, gatherings, dances, but still the sea is omnipresent. That feeling of manic connection to your surroundings – it's embodied in the single petal roses that bloom all over the waxy saturated green leaves at the edge of the sea.

Eucalyptus: Eucalyptus is one of my top five favorite smells in the world.

Trying New Collaborations: On creating the "Jalisco Rain" scent with LALO: The LALO guys told me that when it rains in Guadalajara, they say it's a "tequila day." Being commissioned to make a scent of drinking tequila in the rain is right up my alley. The aromas of tequila blanco are extreme for a perfumer—fruit, flowers, rot, and earth. We balanced this with the lyrics from the famous mariachi ballad "Guadalajara" that joyfully sings of wet earth and roses.

Name

David Seth Moltz

Vocation

perfumer, musician, founder (D.S. & Durga)

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