

On working with scents



Perfumer Anne Serrano-McClain discusses her analog process for blending fragrances, and explains how she coaxes constructive feedback out of non-experts.

November 20, 2018 -

As told to Arianna Stern, 1966 words.

Tags: [Scent](#), [Process](#).

Do you have a certain scent that's like your white whale? As in, you've been chasing it, but you haven't gotten it quite right just yet?

One of the two that I have on the back burner feels kind of like that. It's a jasmine-based scent, and it's different from the other jasmines I've made before. Because jasmine is one of my favorite ingredients, I have it in my mind that any scent using it has to be kind of perfect.

I go into that with all of my fragrances. I have to consider them perfect. It's not like it has to be perfect in the sense that "everyone will love this." It's like, there is this personal thing that I've attached to it. I need to feel it smells perfectly like the idea I had for it.

The other thing I'm going for is a very, very harmonious blend of floral and wood. Often, my fragrances will have a floral element and a wood element, with neither necessarily overpowering the other. That's something I'm always working on, too.

Does your perfectionist impulse make you crazy? How do you manage it?

No, it makes me slow. I'm not like that in other places in my life at all. I'll blast off an email to someone, and not reread it because I'm like, "Oh, it's probably fine."

But when it comes to perfume, it's just a very private thing for me. I usually don't show anyone in process what the final fragrance is going to be. And that goes for the people I work with, too. I'm not like, "Okay, hey, let's have a meeting. I'm feeling pretty good about this one. What do you guys think?" I don't put it up to a test with anyone else besides myself.

And so, it makes me slow. It's hard to say when something is done.

You do some consulting as a perfume evaluator for another brand. Is it ever difficult, time-wise, to balance that with MCMC?

I make it all work, I guess. The consulting doesn't take as much time as my own brand. With my own brand, I spend some time at the lab and at the studio. And then, there is a lot of time that is flexible, where I can just quickly update one of our pages on the website from home.

I definitely work outside of the nine-to-five. It's kind of elastic in that way. And that makes it easier.

Do you think that flexibility is good for creativity?

Yeah. Before I had kids, I would only work on new fragrance development on the weekends, because I like to be in the studio alone. And I'm a morning person. So Saturday and Sunday mornings were usually my favorite times to come into the studio. I'm sure that a lot of creatives are that way, where it just takes a little bit of solitude and concentration.

It requires so much concentration to make the perfume. You know, when I'm talking about modifications, from one fragrance to the next, you're changing so little. Some people wouldn't necessarily notice, "Oh, you brought down the bergamot one gram," or whatever. It's such a big difference for me.

Usually, I would come and do all the creative stuff on a Saturday and Sunday. And I always come outside to smell what I've been working on. It's this long, quiet process. I can't imagine trying to do that aspect of it squeezed into the hours where everyone else is here.

Are internet distractions an issue for you in your work?

It definitely is in life. I have an existential crisis about it every couple months. It's sort of a relief to be working on a fragrance, in that sense, because it becomes really secondary. If I'm doing computer work, I definitely have multiple tabs open. And I'm definitely checking a couple websites for no reason while I'm working.

But in the lab, that's not really the case. I don't work with a computer in front of me. I have a sheet of paper and a pen, and I have the scale and the pipettes, and I have all the ingredients. It's very tactile. For that amount of time, I'm not distracted.

That analog practice seems like it would be very grounding.

Yeah, because you could write the formulas on the computer as you go, and that way, you don't have to switch it over later. But I didn't learn to do it that way. I learned to do it on a sheet of paper, and for me it's comforting to do it that way.

Do your perfumes ever take inspiration from creative work in other disciplines, like music or movies?

A lot of times, the inspiration is a collage of things. They definitely all have a mood, and that could be from a song. Usually, there is a color associated with it. There could be a poem associated with it. I had a fragrance that had a piece of writing as part of the inspiration.

But I would say that, usually, they're not inspired by one thing. It's really like, this esoteric collection of things that in my mind, all go together.

What is the piece of writing tied to your perfume?

The scent "Hunter" is about a friendship that I had spanning many years. More specifically, it's about the person that I had the friendship with, and a book that he introduced me to when we were in high school, *Ishmael*. It's a book about environmentalism. The main character that's telling it is a gorilla.

My association with this friend, the reason I wanted to make a fragrance after him, is because he was the channel through which I became aware of the environment. I grew up in Providence, in the city, and my parents aren't hugely outdoorsy. We went hiking sometimes, very rarely. We went to Maine sometimes. But anyway, it was through this friend that I had fresh eyes for the environment. That book is a big part of that.



It seems like perfumers have to make a lot of decisions about gender, like deciding what is a masculine scent and what is a feminine scent. What is your thought process in making those kinds of decisions?

That's interesting, because when I first started getting interested in perfume, it was sort of this revelation, like, "Hey, no ingredient is gendered."

I really, really like wood notes. You know, like cedar, sandalwood, vetiver, tobacco. Those are all extremely appealing to me. And you know, if you had to categorize them, you would categorize them as masculine notes.

And same with florals. It's all about how you use them. Say a rose, you could make that actually smell quite masculine. You could make it very wood-like, and suitable for any gender. But the way we've been trained since we were really young to think about smell is like, fruity floral is for women. And anything aquatic, sporty, and woody is for men.

In some ways, that might be why I really was drawn to the combination of floral and wood, and that balance. There is harmony that you can reach with ingredients that is neither way: It's not super fresh and it's not crazy sweet and sticky. It's just this really beautiful blending together of ingredients.

If you go on my website, you won't see each thing described as masculine or feminine. We leave it totally open, and the color stories, too. My theory is just, whatever you like is totally fine to wear.

When you're making bespoke fragrances for individuals, do you draw from a different skill set than when you're making fragrances for larger groups?

When I'm making them for my brand, I already know what I want to make. When I'm working one-on-one with somebody, I'm really listening to them. We do what feels like a casual intro in the beginning, where we smell all these

different ingredients. But I'm very carefully keeping track of how they're gravitating towards different things. Not just like, a yes-and-no gravitating, but what they're saying about it-what kind of memory it's triggering for them.

I feel like a detective. It's like, I'm digging and digging at the little bits of info that are coming my way. And then, it's really after that when we start to piece together an ingredient story. It's about watching their reaction as we start to blend. Are they happy? Are they just saying they're happy?

It's so hard to vocalize, for someone who doesn't work with fragrances, what about a smell they are liking or not liking. It's not like they can say, "The iris is too powdery." That would never ever come out of someone's mouth.

It's trying to dig at the little kernels to see if I can interpret them. When we go back to the scales again, can I balance it for them differently so they'll like it? A lot of times, it happens.

There was a woman who came over the summer to make a custom fragrance, and then when we smelled the third one, she cried. She was like, "This is it. This is the smell I imagined I might love."

What are your workarounds? How do you get non-experts to give feedback that's useful to you?

Even if they're not able to express it in the way that would be easiest for me, we just keep talking about what they would like. And it's always helpful in the beginning, too, when someone comes to me with things they like. Often people will have a little purse full of things. And even if they're all different from each other, it's like, trying to find a common thread in it.

Like, "What do you like about this one?" versus, "What do you like about that one?" The more I let people talk, the more nuggets of info I gather.

It sounds like using examples is pretty helpful.

Using examples is really helpful. And then, if we're stuck somewhere, just keep talking about it, or go back and smell some other stuff.

Sometimes someone will smell an ingredient and be like, "Ooh, I really like that." Like, heliotropin has this kind of almond-croissant-paste type of smell. And someone will say they like that, but it turns out they don't like that on their body. It's like, "Let's go back and smell all the ingredients again, and make sure there is not one thing in here that's bothering you."

Do you think that formal education, like going to perfume school, is strictly necessary?

I'm of the camp that it's necessary. It's really unlike so many other crafts out there. There is very little exposure you can get to perfumery outside of being in the industry, or being at perfume school.

One can take a jewelry class, or a cooking class. But it's nearly impossible to take a perfume class. And there is so much to learn. It's an entire field of studies.

I think without having that guided training, it's almost wasteful in some ways. You make things that kind of don't make a lot of sense, because there is a real structure to perfume, technically.

If you were making a pasta, there is a certain pasta-to-sauce ratio, or like, a certain salt ratio that makes sense. All of that exists within perfume as well.

Five things Anne Serrano-McClain loves that refresh her:

Browsing the fragrance counter at [Barney's](#)

Reading *The New Yorker*

Mandy Aftel's *Essence and Alchemy*

Going upstate

The color "almond milk"

Name

Anne Serrano-McClain

Vocation

Perfumer

