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Making Scents: How to create a perfume that is uniquely you

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Anna Behlar leans over to sample a fragrance from Rhonda Trepagnier at Bourbon French Parfums in the French Quarter.

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From the moment I walked into the Jo Malone store in London in 2000, I was in heaven. So many fragrances, and they weren't giving me a headache. No running a gauntlet of perfumed women and men, ever ready to spritz you or wave a scent strip under your nose. Here in Malone's store, fragrances were present, but

you could tell the difference between them without being overpowered. I chose Lime Basil and Mandarin cologne and have been wearing it ever since.

Most people pick a scent and stick with it. Bradley Sumrall, curator at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, uses 4711, an old-school — since 1799 — German eau de Cologne (Kölnisch Wasser) that he has family in Germany ship to him. He has worn it 15 or 20 years, he said. But now, he's thinking of having it made here.

For people hoping to re-create a beloved fragrance or invent a unique one, there are a couple of options: a local store or an online retailer. In New Orleans, Bourbon French Parfums, 805 Royal St., in the French Quarter, custom-blends scents. The store, originally named Doussan French Perfumery, was founded in 1843 by French native August Doussan, who brought over an eau de Cologne formula.

Owned by Mary Behlar since 1991, the store continues the tradition of custom-blending perfume, as well as offering more than 60

signature scents including Kus Kus – a “soft powdery, spicy scent,” according to the website. Created by Doussan, it is the No. 1 seller for women, said Lori Barrios, a store employee.

Although you can just show up and have your own scent made, Barrios recommends you make an appointment, which should take about an hour, start to finish. There is a detailed questionnaire to fill out, including questions about preferences for commercial scents and “notes” – the perfume term for the scents that can be sensed upon its application.

Sweet, floral, powdery or spicy scents are applied to see what how they react – scents don’t always smell the same on different people. Once that decision is made, then the fun begins with creating different perfumes.

A client can create just one formula or additional variations. Barrios showed me notebooks, detailed with clients' formulas, with one woman having 10 formulas the shop can make at any time. The information is also in a computer, but it’s the notebooks that have on-the-spot notes, including other scented product preferences, such as body lotion, bath

gel, bath salts, goat's milk soap bar, body butter, body powder and body shampoo. The cost for the service and a 1-ounce bottle of perfume is \$90 for women. A 4-ounce bottle of cologne is \$60 for men.

Another option is to order custom scents online. This is trickier, but it might save you money, if you craft a scent you like.

I visited two sites — Waft Lab and Me Fragrances — to try the perfume-making process on my own. I know nothing about how to do this, so of course, the stress of “Am I making something that will scare my co-workers?” was ever present.

I started with Waft Lab, which begins by asking customers to make a series of selections: for example, time of day (day or night); activity (sport, social, work or dating); mood (fresh, sexy, elegant or relaxed). Then it asks you to pick three out of 48 ingredients such as bergamot, pine needles and rose.

Next up is to choose what commercial perfumes you like, so you can “inspire” them. Create a name, and after a few seconds, your perfume is created, 50 milliliters for \$79 — a full

refund with shipping is offered if you don't like it. Another option: for \$39, get two small trial sizes with two possible other scents created to pair with them (called "fragrance layering"). If you don't like them, you can cancel the order for the larger bottle of perfume.

Honestly, who wants to do this over and over and over again? But hey, the site is great looking.

The Me Fragrance site, although not as pretty as Waft, was more thorough. First, it stated early on that its products are cruelty free, not tested on animals, metal free and made without chemicals or dyes.

You start by picking what product you want made. In addition to perfume, there are soy candles, diffuser refills and body lotion, to name a few. I stuck with perfume and was pleasantly surprised I could order a sample size for \$5.50.

Then you can choose from their premixed blends, about nine choices, or create your own from two categories: by "fragrance family," if you know what you are doing (not me); or by designer fragrance, which I chose. They query which fragrances you like, and when I typed in

Jo Malone's Lime Basil and Mandarin, 37 ingredients popped up based on that. Then I was asked to choose three ingredients I like, indicating by percentage the top note (most prevalent smell), middle note and base note.

At this point, it just got too complicated for me – if I choose pumpkin spice, will people think I am a walking Starbucks?

I went ahead and ordered a scent – a combination of pink grapefruit, lime and lemongrass – plus one of the premade scents, Pretty Peony, because I like peonies. Hopefully, I'll know soon if I have the “nose” – the term used to describe someone who knows how to combine scents.

No matter the outcome, I do know this: When I want a new perfume or one close to my beloved Jo Malone Lime Basil and Mandarin, I want to smell it, because scent is such a personal thing. Sexy or elegant? Bergamot or pine? Powdery or peony? For me, scents need to be experienced, not just described in a pull-down menu.

More New Orleans scents

Also located in the French Quarter is Hove Parfumeur, 434 Chartres St., which was founded in 1931. Although it does not create custom perfumes for clients, it does sell 53 types of fragrances unique to the store, such as Tea Olive, the most popular for women, and Rue Royale and Diverti, the best-sellers for men.

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