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On the Scent of Luxury With an Upper East Side Perfumer

By Ralph Gardner Jr.

Think of it as Glade air freshener for billionaires. I first detected the scent when I did a column involving the **Mark hotel** in 2011. I noticed that the hallways smelled, well, luxurious. They reeked of wealth. Not in a garish, but in a discreet, sophisticated way. If they could speak they'd have said something like, "You're to be complimented for having the intelligence and good taste, not to mention the discretionary income, to be able to afford our place, and to choose us over the Carlyle across the street." Not that there's anything wrong with the Carlyle.



Frédéric Malle demonstrates the smelling column at his Upper East Side boutique.

I asked the manager, who was showing me around, whether it was my imagination or if the corridors actually smelled yummy. He said I wasn't hallucinating, that the scent had been custom-made for the Mark by perfumer Frédéric Malle. And that one could acquire a bottle at Mr. Malle's boutique.

I think that was the first time I'd heard of Frédéric Malle, or scented hotel corridors, for that matter. But I made a mental note to purchase some of the fragrance the next time I passed one of his stores, or at least determine whether it was in my price range.



Mr. Malle at a refrigerated case of fragrances

I don't think ours is any better or worse than other households. We don't spend a lot of time sweating the scent of our apartment. Indeed, ideally I suppose it wouldn't smell at all. But if it does you'd rather it radiated freshness than cooked fish fumes or wet dog.

On the other hand, wouldn't it be wonderful to know that all it took to feel like you'd awakened in the morning after your IPO went public and discovering you're worth a billion bucks was a perfume gun?

As luck would have it, I happened to be walking down Madison Avenue recently, passed the Frédéric Malle boutique, and stopped in to see whether the staff was familiar with the Mark hotel scent. They directed me to a shelf with several serious-looking, gray industrial spray bottles.

I asked the price: \$150. (I don't know if it's just because I'm cheap or out of touch, but it's a safe bet that things invariably cost triple what I think they should and double what I've decided in advance I'm prepared to pay.)

I said I'd think about it, but asked if I could test what it smelled like. It would be a bummer, I'd go so far as to say suicidal, if I'd spent the price of a prix fixe dinner at Le Bernardin on air freshener, only to get it home and discover it didn't live up to expectations, that my apartment smelled not like spring in Provence but a Parisian bordello.

Rather than spray a little on a card or your wrist—I suppose it wouldn't do to shower the inside of your wrist with air freshener—they directed me to what Frédéric Malle, when I met him a few days later, described as a "smelling column." The device, a transparent cylinder about 7 feet high, resembles something you'd find in a "Star Trek" episode; you enter it, press a button, dematerialize, and show up in the 25th century.

Indeed, I had to staunch my disappointment when I was told I wasn't allowed inside the container. A sales associate simply sprayed a sample inside the column, which circulates the fragrance, and directed me to stick my head through an opening.

It smelled good. Nonetheless, I still wasn't ready to close the deal and told her I'd be back. When I returned a couple of weeks later, Mr. Malle confirmed that the scent was called Jurassic Flower and that he'd made it exclusively for the Mark. "It's a reproduction of a magnolia tree scent," he explained. "It's really true to the scent of magnolia."

I'd have to take his word for that. As I've said, it smelled like money to me.

I asked whether scented corridors were the next thing in luxury hotels or unique to the Mark. "There are some places—some casinos in Las Vegas that are scented," he reported. "But most hotels are not scented."

He said that **Izak Senbahar**, the Mark's owner, resisted the temptation to introduce Jurassic Flower to the hotel's ventilation system and thus guests' rooms, limiting it to the hallways. "He wanted people to have a choice."

Of course, high-end air fresheners—Frédéric Malle makes four scents in addition to Jurassic Flower—constitute only a small part of his business. The bulk of it is men's and women's fragrances distinguished by the creative process. He gives perfume-makers free rein to do their thing, then applies his nose and marketing prowess to help refine the scents.

He's got the pedigree. Mr. Malle's grandfather, Serge Heftler-Louiche, founded Parfums Christian Dior, and his mother, Marie-Christine Sayn Wittgenstein, worked at Dior for 47 years, including as its development director and was involved in the creation of the legendary perfume Eau Sauvage.

He said that he resisted the temptation for many years to join the family vocation—he studied art history at NYU, labored as a photographer's assistant after college, then went into advertising.

But there are probably few disciplines that are more smoke and mirrors than fragrance creation, and that Mr. Malle's skill set seems ideally suited for. He says he'll work late into the night on packaging. "I suppose I was destined to do this. It didn't feel like working to me."

He also knows his perfume, having studied at Roure Bertrand Dupont with legendary perfumer Jean Amic. "It's a lab supplying all the major fragrances," he explained, "Opium, Oscar de la Renta. He asked me to become his assistant and taught me the drill."

He doesn't credit himself with any particular olfactory gift—such as the one possessed by Grenouille, the homicidal perfumer in the novel "Perfume," who is blessed, or perhaps cursed, with the planet's most discerning nostrils. (If you haven't, it's a stunning read.) "I have an

educated nose," he explained. "I don't see better than other people. When I smell a fragrance my approach is similar to an art historian."

Meaning that, like a connoisseur able to recognize a Rembrandt across a museum gallery, through a combination of education, experience and deduction Mr. Malle can recognize the component parts and knows what to add or subtract to create something special.

Even though one of the walls of the Madison Avenue store is hung with photographs of famous perfumers he's worked with—the same way a restaurant or deli might display 8-by-10 autographed glossies of movie stars—he counts only one man who actually possessed a supernatural sense of smell.

"Edouard Flechier," he stated, referring to the creator of scents such as Poison and Acqua di Gio. "Guys who were at perfumery school with him always told me the guy smelled like an animal, like a dog."

Not that he smelled bad, but that his sense of smell was as acute as a canine's.

"We make fragrances to make people desirable," he said. "The endgame is to make people sexy. Anybody thinking otherwise is doomed to fail. You have to make people more sexy than they are."

But does that also apply to air fresheners? "You don't want a sexy home," he said.

He didn't explain why not.