

First person

Olivier De Coster, 41, is a perfumer who creates exotic fragrances exclusively for Belgian fashion designers

“ Waking up and getting up are two entirely different things. I wake up at 8 am but rarely get out of my bed before 10. Before that, for two hours, I sit up in bed, a bottle of Coke in hand, and look at manuscripts sent to me by an editor friend. I shower and then head to the office in a somewhat pure state, having had no coffee or breakfast.

My first task requires this uncontaminated condition: it involves sniffing 50 different smells and conjuring up future scents in my lab in the Marolles. Actually, it's not the nose that knows, it's the olfactory part of the brain that, like a musician, composes a melody of smells. Like notes on a sheet of music, the combination of various different oils transforms single raw materials into works of art.

Two out of three people can do this job but learning it early helps. When I was 13 I met a perfumer in the south of France who took me under his wing. I worked in his distillery and later studied perfumery in Grasse, near Nice. As a child, I wanted to be a doctor and I have a medical degree but the day after graduation, I began working as a perfumer. That was my calling.

Around 11.30 I tackle administrative work, lunch follows with clients or friends in one of my regular haunts up the street like L'Idiot du Village, then I do four hours of uninterrupted creative work.

Imagine a mad chemist pouring small bottles of 2 percent of rosemary with 6 percent of lavender onto a white piece of paper. It is always said that you have to mix a lot of bad scents to make a good one. Sometimes I get lucky and create a perfume in five minutes but that's rare. One perfume for fashion label Archie Pell took eight months.

There are about 300 perfumers in the world and only two of them are Belgian. Because there are so few of us, I've built a solid reputation in the fashion and cosmetic industry since I started in 1987. Designers will contact me to create a perfume or, if I like a particular designer, I'll ask them if I can create a perfume to accompany a line of clothing. Most of them agree because it's good for their brand image.

JEEP NOVAK



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Building relationships with clients is important, but I feel it is a bit of a lost art. I'm sure someone like Calvin Klein never meets his perfumer. But working with companies like Scapa of Scotland taught me that you have to know the tastes of your clients - that's why I like to meet the designers themselves and not just the marketing person.

Belgium is the perfect market for me because Antwerp's school of fashion produces some of the world's best designers. I really want to tap this market

because Belgium doesn't have a perfume industry it can call its own. Of course, everything is on a smaller scale; instead of selling 50,000 bottles like in France, we may sell only 1,000.

I can't name a favourite perfume, although Guerlain's *Chamade* is special because it is composed of blackcurrant, a very aromatic fragrance and vanilla, a basic scent. This makes for an interesting mix. Chanel's *Coco* is intensely oriental and very well-rounded. It's rhythmic in that it changes throughout the day.

It's quite strenuous to continually smell pure perfume and in the evening I'm exhausted.

Evenings are spent cooking for friends, and like the perfumes, I try to create distinctive dishes. One of my favourites is turkey with figs and apples.

Interview by Mei-Yin Teo