

WISH

A woman with short, dark brown hair is the central figure. She is wearing a dark, textured, long-sleeved dress with a high collar and a fringed skirt. She is posing against a marble background. The word "WISH" is written in large, white, serif capital letters across the top of the image. The date "SEPTEMBER 2021" is written in small, white, sans-serif capital letters in the top right corner. The words "THE ITALIAN ISSUE" are written in white, serif capital letters across the bottom of the image.

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The blood of a saint that warns the citizens of Naples if the nearby volcano, Vesuvius, which overlooks their city, will once again turn deadly. The inky depths of the ocean. A modern fable involving a flower, a birch, an animal, a moth and a white cat. The esoteric inspirations driving the new wave of independent Italian perfumers sets a high bar. Thankfully, the end result is just as tantalising as the extravagant back stories.

Over the past decade, a growing crop of independent Italian perfumers, both niche and not so niche, have been making their presence felt in the fragrance market. Ranging from the opulent and extravagant Bogue Profumo and Menditorosa to cerebral and lyrical creators Nasomatto and Meo Fuscini, these brands and noses have carved out an olfactive space distinct from the more familiar French and British houses we've come to associate with the creation of luxury scents. With signature Italian drama, it should be said.

"Italian people have guts," explains avant garde perfumer Alessandro Gualtieri. Infamous for his renegade approach to perfumery and his larger-than-life persona, he is the founder and nose of niche brands Orto Parisi and Nasomatto. To give you an idea of the kind of guts he is talking about, one of his most notorious scents, created for the Orto Parisi line, was called Stercus – the Latin word for manure. Before you let the name put you off, the scent itself is in fact an incredibly

wearable, ambery musk accord. But naming a fragrance – something in theory that we want to smell like – "poo" is proof that Gualtieri is also a master, ahem, shit stirrer. But one with an almost mystical understanding of how to push fragrance to the edge of acceptable while create something that still pleases the senses.

"Throughout history, in the traditional industries you can usually count on the Italians to break away from the norm while maintaining the highest achievable quality," he says. "Nothing against the Brits or the French, but to me the Italians have always had an incomparable edge over the rest of Europe, creatively and as a producer... It's the Italians that brought perfumery to Grasse!"

This edge Gualtieri speaks of could be described as a keen willingness to shake up the "traditional" in favour of the revolutionary. Rather than just fragrances that smell good, like say those produced by a Chanel or a Serge Lutens, these are perfumes that challenge the definition of what smells good. They include Bruno Fazzolari's polarising Lamplack – a salubrious, inky vetiver named after a pigment made from soot that sits on the axis of burnt rubber and petrol fumes. Or Milan-based Masque Milano's Times Square, which seeks to capture the smell of, literally, Times Square and the founders' love of New York, which they say "stinks". And the perfume does too, deliciously so – a warm, hot-fruit concoction, with lipstick and roasted hazelnuts. You can't stop dragging your wrist to your nose to inhale the miasma that is the New York of your dreams.

In 2013 Gualtieri was the subject of a short film called *The Nose* that followed him as he attempted to find inspiration for what was then meant to be the 10th

and final scent for the Nasomatto line. The result of his research was the 2014 release Blamage – a word meaning disgrace – that was made by mistake. Or, more accurately, was made by allowing a mistake to guide the process. Gualtieri was blindfolded and chose four notes to build the scent upon, guided by nose alone. The result: a woody floral that smells surreal, artificial, yet hauntingly familiar. This blurring of fantasy and fact is something Gualtieri does deliberately, including never divulging the notes he uses in his fragrances in order to let people make up their own minds about what it smells like.

"I never disclose the notes used in my work," he tells WISH. "I encourage the consumer to experience and evaluate the smells solely based on their own feelings and the reactions they produce from their surroundings. People have become used to this form of commodity culture in which sheep-like behaviour is pushed to a limit wherein they stop thinking for themselves and rather agree with someone else's opinion. Some may believe that withholding such traditionally available information is a form of disruption. To me, it's a form of freedom."

Breaking rules is one thing, but there's also a sense that many of these independent makers are also maintaining a tradition of Italian identity in their perfumery. Meo Fuscini, founder of the eponymous perfume house Meo Fuscini, says that his hometown of Parma is directly linked to the aesthetic of his creations. "I am tied to the roots of my land, and cities such as Parma, where I live today, carry in their history a long tradition of perfume since the 18th century," he says.

"In the past decade, I have seen and met so many noses and artistic directors of niche perfumery from

all over the world ... we [Italian perfumers] had lost sight of our roots and now that we have recovered our courage we have a healthy madness in us, which helps us to create freely, almost without chains or schemes dictated by academic practice."

Where Gualtieri's work is deliberately provocative, Fuscini is thoughtful and poetic. Working with his in-house nose Giuseppe Imprezzabile, he produces fragrances that are lusciously saturnine. His work Narcotico builds itself upon a fable written by Fuscini himself, unrolling in waves of sultry incense and patchouli. With Notturmo, part of his collection known as the Cycle of Poetry, Fuscini bottles the process of writing, recreating the smell of ink and rum – tools of the poet.

This sense of place, and of inherent Italianness, is also found in the award-winning Menditorosa, based in Naples and founded by Stefania Squeglia in 2012. Its 2017 release, Osang, was inspired by the patron saint of her home city, Naples, San Gennaro, whose liquefied blood is used to predict the fortunes of the city he is said to protect. Composed of rich amber, the spice of fenugreek and resins covered in a glowing note of honey, Osang was a finalist for the 2018 Art and Olfactory Awards in the independent category. (In a twist, Osang lost to Australian milliner and indie perfumer Naomi Goodsir for her brilliant Nuit de Bakelite.)

Even those who create what some would describe as a classic style of perfume still manage to challenge the perception of "classic". Architect and founder of Bogue Profumo Antonio Gardoni develops his fragrances as he would an edifice – building in layers and thinking in



Opposite: Alessandro Gualtieri
Top: A sampling of the new wave of Italian fragrances
Above: Bogue Profumo founder Antonio Gardoni
Opening spread: Meo Fuscini

abstractions. His two most famous releases, Maii and Mem, throw back to perfume's heyday before IFRA (International Fragrance Association) restrictions prevented the use of certain aroma chemicals and natural molecules. Maii is a feral, fecund scent that has the ripe reek of a bedroom the day after. Mem takes the familiarity of lavender and warps it to the point of unknowability. Are they wearable? Absolutely. And yet no, unless you want to smell like a courtesan who hasn't bathed in a month. Which is, surprisingly, really good.

Of course, Italians are not new to perfumery. What the likes of Gualtieri and Fuscini are doing is the continuation of an experimental spirit that's centuries old. When Santa Maria Novella opened its first Australian store in Sydney's Paddington earlier this year it brought with it 800 years of history of Italian aromatics. Elixirs, pot-pourri, scented candles and its signature scent, Acqua di Santa Maria Novella – a perfume commissioned by Catherine de' Medici back in 1533 for her future husband, Enrico di Valois of France, a scent that is still available today for those interested in wanting to smell like a king.

Today, the Florentine *farmaceutica*, which still operates in its original location at Via della Scala just metres from the Church of Santa Maria Novella, has found itself a loyal global audience chasing the holy trinity – provenance, authenticity and originality. A mixture of the soft floral and bracingly herbal ingredients used in its creations results in an aromatic signature that smells almost otherworldly in comparison to many contemporaries. You could say it was doing clean fragrances before they were even a thing. "Since 1221, the Dominican Friars of Santa Maria Novella Farmaceutica have been distilling the efficacious elements from local herb, flowers and rare ingredients brought to Europe with the discovery of the new world," explains Santa Maria Novella's educator, Michael Marzano.

Despite being nearly a thousand years old – or maybe because of it – Santa Maria Novella's offerings are a tonic of comfort in today's commercial and synthetic-heavy fragrance market. Some of the scents are even downright medicinal, bitingly herbaceous. "The aromatic signature of Santa Maria Novella is best described as nature meets pharmacology," explains Marzano. "The Dominican monks have over the centuries garnered the aroma benefits of plants that are either cultivated by them, or harvested from the surrounding environs of Florence and around the globe."

This experimentation has since translated to an array of fragrances that touch on nearly every aspect of the perfume spectrum. From Peau D'Espagne – a carnation, birch and civet heavy concoction with a pungent leathery drydown – that will put hair on your chest, and Opoponax, which smells like someone is burning rich resins from within the hidden depths of a forest, to the more familiar cologne-like structures of citrus and white flowers we've come to associate with classic Italian perfumery. "Walk down the street in any Italian town, close your eyes, and breathe in," Marzano tells WISH. "Coffee, vanilla, citrus blossoms and fruits, figs, pine, incense – the blend is delicious, timeless and unique. The natural world of the Mediterranean permeates not only the rich art and culture of the region, but also its world-famous cuisine and Italy's outstanding tradition of perfume-making. In fact, this is where European perfumery began." ☺