

IRL: INTERACT WITH NOTES

SCENT FROM PARIS

“P eople associate fragrance with luxury goods, but it is so much more than that,” says Sandra Armstrong, director and co-founder of LE GRAND MUSÉE DU PARFUM in Paris. “It is emblematic of French culture and *art de vivre*.” Here, in the former HQ of the Christian Lacroix couture

house, a stunning 17th-century mansion at 73 Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré, she leads me through three light-filled floors that are built around a private garden and designed so that visitors can experience fragrance in an immersive and interactive way. “Fragrance is also about seduction, spirituality and medicine,” she explains. Armstrong and three others opened the museum last December with seven million euros in private funding from 40 French families so it would be independent from particular brands.

She draws my nose toward a diffuser of tonkin musk worn by the court of Louis XIV. It reeks of urine and sweat. In the Seducers’ Gallery, I learn that Napoleon used 40 litres of cologne per month and even drank a few drops before battle for protection. Upstairs, we explore the playful aspect of fragrance in games where you can send your seatmate a scent to guess. The museum is resolutely contemporary in its technology, if only to drive home the idea that fragrance is universal—in our past, present and future. In the Garden of Scents, I close my eyes while I stand under giant white flowerlike sculptures and breathe in the scents of a lit fireplace, a glass of rum and raspberries. Perfumers like Jean-Claude Ellena have contributed installations, such as alcoves with individual scents—including absinthe—as well as one in which the scents are blended together. The most impressive exhibit, built by British industrial design firm Harvey & John, features wooden spheres suspended from the ceiling that contain 25 of the 1,500 most essential components of perfume, which you smell and then select on an iPod touch. Later, in the concept store, your favourites are matched with real perfumes from diverse brands, 70 of which are for sale. Armstrong gravitates toward amber, I to white jasmine, while we both agree that regardless of the brand, shopping for perfume is an experience that is best enjoyed in person. —S.B.

FROM TOP: THE GARDEN OF SCENTS; A WOODEN SPHERE CONTAINING A RAW MATERIAL; THE GARDEN SIDE OF THE MUSEUM; READING ABOUT PLANT LIFE



IRL: INHALE A SUNSET

Light Show

“The golden hour”—just after sunrise and just before sunset—is a poetic and fleeting time of day. Van Gogh prized its soft light, shadows and tones, as do photographers and filmmakers like Terrence Malick, who shoots almost exclusively during this time.

In the French region where L’Occitane was founded, the golden hour is also a unique time aromatically. “It’s when the scents of Provence—and we have confirmation from perfumers—are at their best because they’ve been drinking in this beautiful light,” says Alessandra Elia, global head of fragrance development for L’Occitane.

Terre de Lumière (\$105) seeks to capture this experience in a bottle. For inspiration, perfumer Shyamala Maisondieu recalls a memory she has of visiting the village of Gordes and discovering lavender honey. “It’s unique because it’s not very liquid; it’s very creamy, so you scrape it instead of pour it,” she says. “It’s very Provençal. So I built an accord around that idea.”

Maisondieu also wanted to convey the mix of coolness and warmth that occurs when a slice of sunlight is either sinking down or rising up. Working with two other perfumers, Nadège Le Garlantezec and Calice Becker, she created two opposing accords: a fresh, aromatic essence and a gourmand one. “So you can imagine the sun going down, the smell of the herbs coming out,” she says, which contrasts with the “delicious, warm” part of the fragrance.

Creating a perfume that aims to replicate a specific time and place speaks to how much fragrance is, at its heart, shaped by human experience. For one, perfumers create scents based on their own influences and experiences. “We always go back to a certain memory and build on it,” says Maisondieu. But for anyone either wearing a fragrance or simply inhaling it, it’s just a matter of time before the scent is assigned an association. Either way, this connection can’t be imprinted through a screen and Maisondieu is against the idea of trying. “Fragrances are part of memories, and it’s something very emotional,” she says. “I can’t see it in bits and bytes. It’s like making fragrance into zeros and ones. It’s too complex for that.” —Lesia Hannah