

PORTRAIT *of a* PERFUMER

By Cassidy Hazelbaker



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Cassidy Hazelbaker meets with master perfumer Frédéric Malle to discuss the Arabian origins of perfume, the language of fragrance and his latest collection, *Édition de Parfums Frédéric Malle*.

Renowned French perfumer Frédéric Malle wears a classic suit and a trendy blue tie when I meet him in his enclave within Harvey Nichols. He appears right at home surrounded by the black and white portraits of the master perfumers who have contributed to his collection *Édition de Parfums Frédéric Malle*. The boxes in which the fragrances are packaged are neatly lined up in a bookshelf resembling a well-organized bookcase full of red volumes. I have come to ask him about these volumes, which form a collection of 18 fragrances created by nine of the most talented perfumers in the world. All of them have been assembled under his curatorship.

It has taken Malle 13 years to develop the collection. When asked how his concept for the perfume line has developed during the production process, he emphatically declares “it hasn’t!” He explains that he wanted to encourage great perfumers to develop their ‘pet’ fragrances, free from popular market constraints. The press responded to the collection’s launch enthusiastically, and his perfume line was soon featured in publications such as the *International Herald Tribune*, *Le Figaro* and *Liberation*. American publications quickly followed suit, spreading positive reviews

of the collection internationally. Malle explains that he found the link between demanding customers and the art of perfume making and how his range of creative and original fragrances solidified this missing link. At the time, the concept of an anthology of fragrances was new on the international market. Many other perfume brands have since followed the concept of a collection of fragrances.

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Malle was inspired by leading French publishing house *Éditions Gallimard*. He imitated their design of a crisp font and the use of black, white and red. The perfume bottles and packaging even mimic the layout of a book, complete with

a title, author and publisher. Even the Frédéric Malle area within Harvey Nichols resembles a library of sorts: a colorful sofa provides a seating area from which to browse the titles at hand, while a refrigerated glass curio cabinet showcases the unpackaged bottles. When a customer selects a fragrance, it is removed from the refrigerator and packaged on the spot. By avoiding pre-packaging, the experience of selecting and purchasing a perfume becomes a personal experience.

A MIDDLE EASTERN FRAGRANCE PHENOMENON

Many of the fragrances in the *Édition de Parfums* feature sandalwood, amber, rose and patchouli, among other Arabian elements. The collection is a natural fit for the Middle East. Malle acknowledged that many of the clients at his Paris and New York stores are from the region. However, when asked if these scents were developed specifically for Middle Eastern clients, Malle answers, “No, I never aimed at a specific market or made a fragrance with a particular consumer in mind. The endgame was a beautiful fragrance, not a product which would please a particular customer.” But Malle doesn’t fail to note the importance of perfume in the culture and heritage of the Middle East. “Middle Easterners



have good taste in perfume. As far as the recent emphasis on perfumes from the region, trends are certainly in the air,” he says. “Fragrance has been important to the Middle East for thousands of years. Even the ancient Egyptians used fragrance. The region is hot, there’s not a lot of water and people have traditionally wanted perfume as a refreshing contrast to the natural environment and climate.”

Now, he thinks the international perfume market is making a mockery of Arabian scents. “Ninety nine percent of oud fragrances created by Western brands don’t even contain oud,” he explains. “They contain other elements which customers often confuse with oud. The local tradition should be treated with respect.”

THE RIGHT SCENT

Malle is undoubtedly one of the greatest noses of our era. As the grandson of the creator of Perfumes Christian Dior, he has been surrounded by the art and science of fragrance his entire life. When asked if a great nose is something one is born with or something which one develops, he replies that a perceptive nose is nurtured over time. Though mastering fragrance runs in his family, he modestly claims “mine is just an average nose, but a well-trained one.” Along with training, perfume production requires patience.



Malle explains how perfecting a particular formula entails testing different combinations, painstakingly adding or subtracting one drop of essence until the scent is just right. “There are no coffee beans in the lab,” he jokes. Perfume creation is an art; beautiful, but requiring an overwhelming amount of precision. He recalls the development of one of the collection’s signature scents, Portrait of a Lady. The perfume, which contains the essence of 391 roses, was finalized after 690 trials that spanned two years.

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While Malle is celebrated for his role in the production of perfume, he also has plenty to say about its use, declaring, “a great perfume on the right person is an unbeatable match.” How does an untrained nose go about finding the perfect scent? How much depends on a person’s natural chemistry versus a person’s personality and olfactory preference? Malle answers that it depends on the person’s demeanor. A loud person will wear a loud perfume and vice versa. If a quiet person wears a loud perfume then it

says something about the person’s inner thoughts and feelings. Perfume is chosen instinctively. Selecting a perfume is a language many speak but don’t understand. Most people choose perfume innocently without realizing what it says about their personality. Lucky for us, he is willing to share his fluency in this complicated language. Malle has specially trained his salesmen to identify key traits within a person’s personality, character and chemical makeup to help customers identify their correct fragrance.

Malle exudes passion for his fragrances. It is impossible to leave a meeting with him not feeling informed and inspired. “I’ve wanted to work out of Dubai for a long time,” he explains. “This has been planned for a while, and I’m really excited to be here.” His collection has been 13 years in the making, drawing on his expert nose to ensure that every drop of essence is well-placed. From the perfume recipes to the sleek packaging to the perfume trying and purchasing experience, Éditions de Parfums Frédéric Malle is a true fragrance of luxury which is right at home in the Middle East.

All images courtesy Harvey Nichols Dubai.

Éditions de Parfums Frédéric Malle is available at Harvey Nichols Dubai.