

SCENT OF A MAN

For nearly a decade, Thierry Wasser has been the nose behind one of the biggest fragrance empires in the world: The House of Guerlain.

BY MICHELE MEYER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY POL BARIL



Most boys growing up in the Swiss village of Chamby in the early Seventies collected soccer trading cards—but not Thierry Wasser. He chose instead to gather herbs, sometimes playing hooky from school to dry them or to explore a neighbor's raspberry fields.

"It was a great escape," says Wasser, who learned to recognize 3,000 scents at a young age.

Decades later, he became the fifth person—and the first non-family member—to be named head perfumer at Guerlain. Wasser, now 55, is so passionate about the storied house, he can recite from

memory all 800 scents from Guerlain's 189-year history, including when each was created. Every year, he adds 20 or so fragrances to the canon, each 20 months in the making. His favorite? "How can you choose which child you prefer?" he asks coyly. "Maybe secretly you have one, but you don't say."

Wasser was just 12 when he realized the power of fragrance. His mother had a Tunisian friend who wore Caron's Pour Un Homme. Recalls Wasser: "He was complex, cultured, and well-traveled, and the scent was all that too."

Another friend's masculine patchouli-leather-laced cologne—Guerlain's Habit Rouge—

prompted Wasser's first purchase at 13. "I looked like I was 8, but it gave me the confidence to act like a young man," he says of the classic fragrance he still wears today.

He paid for his favorite scent by whipping up red martini aperitifs from dandelion, orange zest, and herbs fermented with yeast he sold to neighbors and relatives for 5 francs a bottle.

By 16, he was thrown out of school for poor attendance but landed an apprenticeship as an herbalist in Geneva, where he also pursued a botany degree. He joined Givaudan's perfumery school as a student and the firm itself in 1982.

Poached by the fragrance house Firmenich in 1993, Wasser made the move to Manhattan. "The environment was cut-throat," he says of his time in New York. He transferred to Paris nine years later, where his creativity and restored aplomb sparked hits including Christian Dior's Addict, Lancôme's Hypnôse, and Emporio Armani's Diamonds.

In 2007, Wasser worked alongside Guerlain's fourth-generation head perfumer Jean-Paul Guerlain, creator of his beloved Habit Rouge, on Guerlain Homme. Both direct and mischievous, the two got along "better than family," Wasser says. Indeed, Guerlain has said he considers

Wasser his "adopted son" and teasingly tags him *mon vieux* (a French term of endearment meaning "my old friend"). Says Wasser: "I respect and love the man." He would watch Guerlain tinker with one formula as many as 55 times. "There are no rules in this job," he adds. "It's highly personal."

One day in 2008, Guerlain led his protégé into his office at the house's factory in Orphin, France. Opening a refrigerator-sized safe, he handed Wasser family formulas dating back to 1828—and the title of head perfumer. "It was powerful but also natural," Wasser recalls of the moment.

As the house's prime "nose," Wasser conceives

of and formulates all of Guerlain's new fragrances. But the job, he says, is "more about the brain." In addition to creating new products, he also oversees ingredients sourcing, quality control, manufacturing, public relations, and the house itself.

"I am most comfortable in the fields, lab, factory, and stores," he says. "Each has its own pace and joy. But I don't fit in boardrooms, where directness is not always an asset."

Wasser visits the factory weekly and, much like his mentor—whom he affectionately calls

Continued on page 118

10 things about THIERRY

Precious childhood scent: "The aroma of apricot tarts permeating my home"

Self-description: "I'm a person who is empathetic, heartfelt, and hates conflict."

Wardrobe: "Natty" Christian Dior suits, Thomas Pink shirts, Charvet ties, Berluti shoes (all LVMH labels, Guerlain's parent company)

Drink of choice: Ruinart Champagne

Scents he wears: Habit Rouge and Vetiver

Scent he can't tolerate: "I can't stand the smell of neighbors' cooking, especially grilled fish."

Thorn in his side: His fiancé wears the woody Terre d'Hermès. "It's wonderful, and I wish I'd created it. But whenever he wears it, it [irks] me a bit!"

Fun fact: He once tried insuring his nose, "like a pianist or surgeon would [insure] their hands. But science cannot prove you've lost your sense of smell, so even Lloyd's of London wouldn't do it."

Embracing his inner 12-year-old: "At that age, you're curious, bold, and don't care what others think. Being 12 at 55 keeps your mind fresh."

Scent he'll be remembered by: "It's not my place to say. Let's wait for my eulogy."



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SCENT OF A MAN

continued from page 95

"the Indiana Jones of fragrance"—circles the globe three months out of the year to track the finest raw materials.

Determined to recapture original versions of three iconic Guerlain fragrances—1912's L'Heure Bleue, 1919's Mitsouko, and 1925's Shalimar—he once persuaded producers in India and Italy to revive obsolete and endangered plants so he could experience the earliest formulas. "My bond with farmers is so strong," he says.

Another time, when a grower told him he had pulled the last crop of jasmine in Italy, Wasser says: "I asked him to allot a couple of acres to it, and Aqua Allegoria Jasminora was produced from that field."

To Wasser, ingredients are like musical notes: Each has its own vibration from which he creates the final tune. "You can endlessly polish it but don't always know when it's done," he says. "When I have to start manufacturing, that's when I stop."

Emotions, experiences, and his predecessors' creations are what spark Wasser's creativity. For example, the joy of being named chief perfumer at Guerlain infused his very first eau de parfum, Idylle, and L'Abeille plays off of 1910's Quand Vient L'Été and the act of bees buzzing over blossoms in Guerlain's fields. Says Wasser: "I tell stories translated via scents."

At home—an apartment overlooking Paris' Bois de Boulogne park, where he lives with his fiancé—Wasser begins his day with an early breakfast before heading to the lab to toil in silence, a blank slate for his storytelling. Outside of holidays in Houston with his fiancé's family and trips to source ingredients, he rarely vacations but for the occasional trip to Aspen. "Even as a Swiss citizen, I prefer the town and the people there," he says of the American ski town.

As for the House of Guerlain, Wasser says he hopes to remain right where he is for perhaps another 15 years, where he is now guiding his own mentee: "My best legacy will be having someone worthy of succeeding me." 🐾