# the new fragrance frontier

Americans dream of open spaces. It's why we turn road trips into rituals and make pilgrimages to canyons. Even if we're accustomed to city life, the prospect of endless coastlines, piney clearings, and desert immensity tugs at us. This, in an unintended way, has complicated our relationship with fragrance. The purpose of a perfume, after all, is to draw others into our orbit. But that can feel intrusive. Pushy. Americans have never quite found a way to reconcile our desire for a broad wingspan with the close and encompassing nature of fragrance. Until now. **By Liana Schaffner**

Saguara Desert Lavender captures the crisp aroma of the desert.

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# EL COSMICO

## D.S. & DURGA

D.S. & Durga El Cosmico is a play between the desert's lunar landscape and a confusion of stars.

A movement composed of independent, homegrown perfumers is reshaping the fragrance landscape, gradually changing the way we approach and experience scent. Straying from tradition, these olfactory trailblazers are creating fragrances with a distinctly American feel—solitary, rugged, luminous. A new frontier. But there's another virtue, beyond the pioneering spirit, that motivates this group to push boundaries and break genres. It's called defiance, and it's just as entrenched in our American mentality. These artisans are inspired not necessarily by their love of fragrance but by a sense of opposition to it.

"I really do hate perfume," says Christopher Brosius, the founder of the avant-garde and aptly named fragrance line CB I Hate Perfume. His antagonistic view is understandable given the way he discovered the power of his nose. At the age of 18, Brosius left his home in rural Pennsylvania to study architecture at Columbia and later fashion at Parsons in New York City. To help make ends meet, he drove a yellow cab around town on weekends, when he'd invariably pick up passengers wearing cartoonishly sweet, splashy, or floral scents. "I'd get nauseous and have to roll down the windows, even in the dead of winter," he says. "Freeze or vomit. Those were my options."

Except he found a third option: create perfume that doesn't smell like perfume. Substituting heaps of research and obsessive studying for formal training, Brosius began producing fragrances that re-create the smell of objects, places, and specific moments in time. He gave them unwieldy but evocative names, like In the Summer Kitchen, with notes inspired in part by the smoke-blackened rafters at his family's farm. His work has won high praise and industry honors, but none of that has clouded his vision or softened his attitude toward nondescript scents. "My work is about creating an experience, something that resonates with the wearer in a clear, direct, emotional way," he says. "If your goal is to just smell nice, well, here's a bar of soap for you."

Not that many Americans would refuse a nice bar of soap. We are utterly seduced by smells of clean laundry, fresh linen, powdery detergents, and starched collars. Somewhere along the way, we managed to conflate the terms "spotless" and "sexy." What gives? It all goes back to that notion of fragrance crossing boundaries and drifting into personal space—an idea so provocative and faintly subversive that it once gave fragrance a taboo air. Through much of the twentieth century, perfume was considered an intimate article, on the same level as lingerie. Buying it was a husband's province, not something for a woman to dabble in. That all changed in 1953, when Estée Lauder launched Youth Dew, a spicy floral oriental bath oil that doubled as a perfume (it's now

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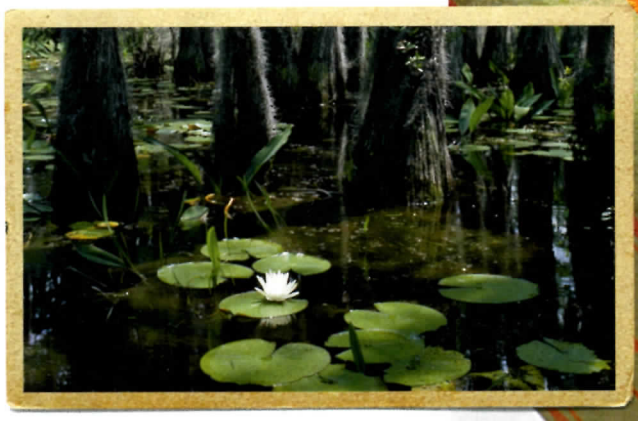
sold as two separate products). Since there was nothing suspicious about women purchasing their own bath products, they freely drizzled Youth Dew into their tubs and emerged smelling sultry—with squeaky-clean skin. How's that for subliminal messaging?

The newest wave of American perfumers aren't interested in cleanliness. They're interested in dirtiness. We don't mean those musky, glandular, animalic notes that give classic French perfumes their potent base and seductive trails. We mean real-life dirt, scooped from the ground, rich in mineral content and spiritual meaning. "When our senses engage with nature, it's a magical, transformative experience," says Hall Newbegin, the founder of the all-natural fragrance line Juniper Ridge. "The next time you're on a hike, stick your nose in a rotting log. Nothing smells more primitive." Newbegin walks the walk, so to speak. An Oregon native and outdoorsman, he and his team spend months "on the trail," harvesting ingredients for the brand's organic perfume oils. "I want the wearer to experience the essence of these places, even if they've never been before." Take Big Sur, an olfactory portrait of redwood canyons and crackling campfires. Remember that bucket-list road trip? Here it is, in a bottle.

Not all perfumers who are inspired by geography and exploration take such a rough-hewn approach. "I'm just trying to be as experimental as possible, to come up with something entirely new," says perfumer David Seth Moltz of D.S. & Durga, the Brooklyn fragrance house that has landed, suddenly and spectacularly, on the industry's radar. Moltz designs scents that recall literal objects and physical places, but their composition is so protean and expansive, it's easy to get lost in them. One of his more recent creations, El Cosmico, is currently on display at London's Somerset House, joining an exhibition that celebrates unconventional scents. "It doesn't smell like anything else," says Moltz. Meaning it actually smells supernatural. The fragrance is based on the cultish West Texas campground of the same name. With scruffy notes of pine, sumac, oak, and sand, it has a dusky quality that opens up and scatters wide. The effect is extraterrestrial, a play between the desert's lunar landscape and a confusion of stars.



Imaginary Authors Saint Julep is a love letter to the American South.

"The woodwork and rafters still smell faintly of two centuries of cooking," says Brosius of the kitchen at his family's farm that inspired In the Summer Kitchen.

The theme of vastness and outdoor beauty isn't new to fragrance. Chances are you could wander around any perfume counter blindfolded and still bump into a scent that conjures a beach or a flower field. What's different about El Cosmico, or the dreamy desert offerings at the Los Angeles perfumery Orris, is that these fragrances are also precisely focused. They portray not simply big, wide places but a keen point of view, just like those heady flashes of clarity that we get when we visit them. Applied to perfume, it's a radical concept. "These brands bring forward a personal vision that will only connect with people who share a similar sensibility," says Daniel Green, who teaches fragrance marketing and management at Savannah College of Art and Design. "They're powerful because they're not trying to be everything to everybody but to be everything to somebody."

There's an irresistible, voyeuristic element at play here; these scents allow us an unobstructed glimpse into the mind of the perfumer, enriching the experience all around. "It's like a keyhole," says Moltz. "I have a whole world in my head that I'm trying to share." That's the condensed view. But Frederick Bouchardy, the owner of the Brooklyn-based fragrance studio Joya, has taken the idea of transparency to a new extreme. "Our store is embedded in our manufacturing facility so people can see the guts of what we're doing," he says. "We're exposing the entire process, how every element comes together. It's the precise opposite of what usually happens in this industry." Pulling back the curtain and allowing everyone a peek inside the rarefied world of fragrance also means allowing everyone a piece of the action. Bouchardy's fragrances are velvety, oil-based elixirs that hug the pulse points. They come in hand-sculpted, gold-lettered bottles that command a steep price. But Bouchardy has also created rollerball versions of his scents, which you can drop in a clutch instead of placing reverently on a shelf. This reflects a wider egalitarian effort on the homegrown front that aims to put high-end perfume within reach.


Juniper Ridge Siskiyou transports you to the mountains of the West.

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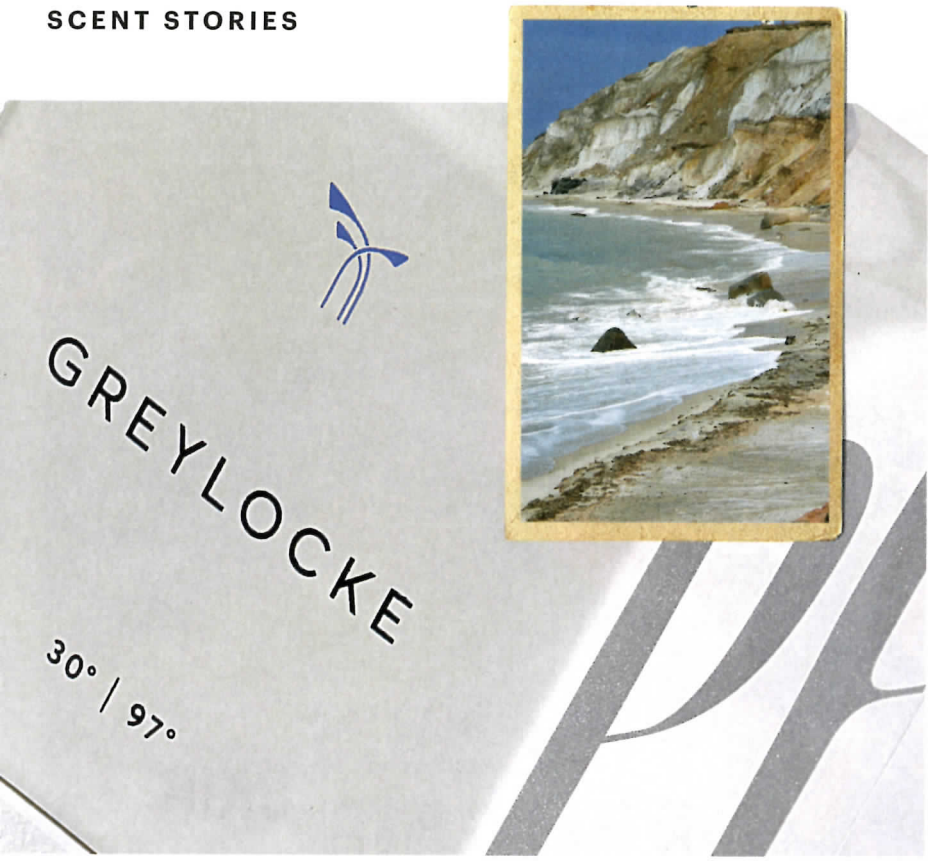




With notes of birch, salt, and pine resin, Phlur Greylocke captures a weekend in New England.

Austin-based and eco-minded company Phlur is rooted in this democratic ideal. Phlur sells directly to consumers, pouring money that would typically go into hefty distribution costs into the perfume itself, which allows the brand to source ingredients from top suppliers. Granted, investing in a perfume that you haven't tested is a leap of faith (a small leap; the company offers $15 sample sets), but Phlur's scents come across as familiar, even before you've smelled them. Our favorite, Greylocke, contains birch, salt, and pine resin. "It smells like New England," says the company's founder, Eric Korman. (For the record, it does.)

Balancing artistry and accessibility isn't so much a tightrope walk as a natural high for Josh Meyer, the self-trained perfumer behind Portland's Imaginary Authors. "It's ridiculously fun to do," says Meyer, who, though based in Oregon, betrays his California roots by dropping the occasional "whoa, man" and skateboarding around the office. But Meyer's youthful enthusiasm is only partly evident in his collection. Every scent has a remarkably vivid, finely tuned quality. He presents each one as a story, dreamed up by a fictional scribe. They have names that Hemingway wishes he thought of (Every Storm a Serenade, The Cobra & the Canary) and come with illustrated bottles that are so original, they smack of first editions. Meyer's newest scent, Saint Julep, is a tribute to the American South, with a splash of sweet bourbon and "esoteric" mint. The result is neither sweet nor esoteric but somewhere in between: "My goal is to make something that's incredible and wearable, not intimidating."

All of these scents proclaim what we Americans have more or less proclaimed ourselves: We're wanderers, protesters, optimists. And at the heart is good old-fashioned audacity. "The one thing these companies have in common is that we're risk-takers to the core," says Bouchardy. "All of us, when we first started, were paying ourselves last. We were staying up until 3 o'clock in the morning making tough and weird and bold decisions. And we're just going for it."

Dream big, America.

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Joya Foxglove is an homage to New York's parks and wetlands.