



Grasse, France

# Perfume: The Essence of Illusion



▲ “For me perfume is an indulgence,” says Angie Battaglia, an Austin, Texas, businesswoman who owns 30 scents.

“Perfume,” says Sophia Grojsman of International Flavors & Fragrances, “is a promise in a bottle.” We want to believe. We want to be prettier, richer, sexier, and happier than we are. Consider the labels on the fragrances we buy: Joy, Dolce Vita, Pleasures, White Diamonds, Beautiful. Said Charles Revson, founder of the Revlon cosmetics company, “We sell hope.”

In terms of chemistry, fragrances are a mixture of aromatic oils and alcohol. Perfume has a concentration of oils greater than 22 percent. Eau de parfum has a 15 to 22 percent concentration. The less aromatic eau de toilette has 8 to 15 percent oils, and cologne contains less than 5 percent oils. The “fixatives,” or oils that make a fragrance last a long time, traditionally came from animals. Those have mostly been replaced by **synthetic** chemicals. The other ingredients come from plants, most notably flowers.

The area around Grasse, France, is **renowned** for its flower plantations. Farmers like Joseph Mul have been

producing roses, jasmine, and lavender for centuries. Mul’s rose absolute, a liquid extracted from rose petals, sells for \$3650 a pound. Explains Mul, “Picking roses will never be done by machine.” The rose petals are carefully harvested by hand during the early morning. By ten o’clock, the heat of the sun begins to **wilt** the flowers, and the workers are done for the day. “Labor is 60 percent of the cost,” says Mul.

The high cost of natural ingredients is just one of the reasons that perfumers today also use artificial ingredients in their fragrances. Synthetics also allow perfumers to use scents such as lilac that cannot be obtained naturally, or scents from flowers that are too rare to be picked. Synthetics save wild animals from being used for their **musk** as well. According to perfumer Harry Fremont, “Good fragrance is a balance between naturals and synthetics.”

Once perfumers have created a lovely fragrance, it’s time for the marketing department to work its magic. The industry spends hundreds of millions of dollars each year to convince people to buy something they don’t really need. The success rate for new perfumes is low—only about one in ten is successful, so spending money on advertising is a **big gamble**. It’s also the only way to let the world know about a fragrance so beautiful that a man will miss the woman who wears it when she leaves the room, a perfume so enchanting that it can make us believe our dreams will come true.



▲ A woman picks night-blooming jasmine flowers at dawn in a field in India.