

# Chanel No5 [C1]

La celebre autrice Tilar J. Mazzeo esplora l'intrigante storia del rivoluzionario Chanel n. 5, nato da un incontro casuale con l'aristocrazia russa e diventato l'essenza stessa della sensualità femminile. Questo profumo è niente meno che uno dei prodotti più popolari della storia del brand Chanel.



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Coco Chanel is known for her haute couture and [ready-to-wear](#) outfits, but few people can afford to buy them. What brought her fame on a global scale was the perfume Chanel No. 5. Introduced in 1921 and bottled in 1922, the perfume was so [revered](#) that in 1925 it was exhibited at the Art Deco Exhibition in Paris as an aromatic work of modernist art. In the 1950s, celebrities such as Marilyn Monroe helped establish its reputation as a brand that would bring women autonomy over their bodies. Ironically, Chanel herself spent decades fighting the perfume that still defines her. She called it “the monster”, after Dr. Frankenstein’s creature, who [took over](#) his life and, for some, his very identity. To find out more, we spoke to Canadian-American cultural historian Tilar J. Mazzeo, author of *The Secret of Chanel No. 5: The Intimate History of the World’s Most Famous Perfume*. As Mazzeo explained, the story of Chanel No. 5 begins in 1913 in Imperial Russia. **Tilar Mazzeo**(Canadian-American accent): Coco Chanel was in a love affair with a

member of a Russian aristocratic family named Dmitry Pavlovich. And he was [related to](#) the Tsar and the Tsarina and had [fled](#) into exile. He's the one who introduces her to the history of this perfume. Chanel No. 5 was a reformulation of a perfume that had been created by Ernest Beaux for the Tsarina, who was his aunt. Originally, it was known as of the [Bouquet](#) of Catherine — but it had failed in the Russian marketplace. It was not a good moment to be launching a perfume [named after](#) a Russian empress. So this was a perfume that Dmitry Pavlovich remembered from his childhood.

## SCENT OF A WOMAN

The Russian-French perfumer Ernest Beaux was living in the South of France in the early 1920s, and he and Chanel got together. Beaux was innovative about his approach to recreating the perfume, mixing a series of aldehydes: perfumes with pure, clean scents, with indoles: [heady](#), erotic aromas. **Tilar Mazzeo:** Arctic air is very high in aldehydes. And that was balanced with these heavy, sexy scents that are very high in indoles, like jasmine. Indoles are perfumes that were historically associated with prostitution. And so this perfume balances this incredibly earthy, almost [raunchy](#), floral note with this electrifying sense of something [bracingly](#) clean. It is this complete contradiction that Chanel and Beaux thought of as the heart of women's sexuality.

## INFLUENCERS

Beaux made a number of reformulations, and Chanel picked the fifth, her lucky number. She then wore it out to a [posh](#) restaurant. Tilar Mazzeo: She understood luxury and what women wanted in luxury products. So the launch was that she wore it at a very exclusive restaurant in the South of France. And as she walked by, everybody said, "What is that scent?" And so that was how she created this [buzz](#). Then it was given to these very exclusive clients who are what we would now call 'influencers' in high society.

## IN ABSTRACT

Chanel only meant to give the perfume as a gift to a few couture customers, but it was soon in demand. She packaged the product in a simple toilettry bottle with a sophisticated avant-garde concept behind it. **Tilar Mazzeo:** Before that, perfumes were representational. They were meant to create a bouquet of flowers that actually existed in the world. Chanel No.5 represented the abstraction of a bouquet of flowers that does not exist in the world but is the pure form of a bouquet of flowers. She said that what she wanted was a bottle that was “naked”; it’s translucent, so that the thing being displayed is simply form.

## THE DEAL

The product became too big for her to handle, and Chanel was worried that her autonomy and identity as a female clothes designer would be compromised. So she sold the rights of the perfume to investors. **Tilar Mazzeo:** She decides that she will bring in a company called Bourgeois. They are perfume manufacturers and distributors and they’re associated with one of the big department stores in Paris. In her mind, her artistry is her couture work and she doesn’t want to do anything that can possibly touch her autonomy as a couturière. So she spins it off as a different business. She says: “Chanel No. 5 is yours. What I want is a certain percentage of profits in perpetuity.”

## BATTLE FOR AGENCY

Chanel bitterly regretted her decision. She spent decades trying to undo the deal. **Tilar Mazzeo:** She had no way of knowing that Chanel No. 5 would become Chanel No.5. These investors do a great job. They turn it into an iconic perfume and they make her an incredibly wealthy woman. But Coco Chanel comes to deeply resent and regret the decision she made. So she ends up, in these very self-destructive ways, doing emotional battle with the owners, but also with the perfume itself. So there is a moment where she decides that she’s going to tear down Chanel No.5 on the grounds that it’s

not being produced luxuriously enough. And she's going to reintroduce, under a different name, the same scent as the "real Chanel".

## A WIN AND A LOSS

That scent, called Coco Mademoiselle, was almost the same as Chanel No.5, but not quite. And it failed to have the same effect. In the end, Coco Chanel did manage to renegotiate the deal, but while the result would give her the autonomy she desired, it would do so in a way that spoke volumes about the agency of women at the time. **Tilar Mazzeo:** They agreed to pay all of her expenses — even her [postage stamps](#). Regaining her autonomy later in her life meant never having to worry about money. In the end, what she wants it's to again become a [kept woman](#). So it's a heartbreaking story in some ways.

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# Glossary

- **revered** = adorare
- **heady** = inebriante
- **spins it off** = creare un'attività diversa
- **regretted** = dispiacersi
- **couturière** = stilista
- **resent** = risentirsi per
- **took over** = prendere il controllo
- **related to** = imparentato con
- **posh** = chic, snob
- **toiletry** = articoli per l'igiene personale
- **displayed** = mostrare
- **bring in** = introdurre
- **postage stamps** = francobolli
- **fled** = fuggire
- **named after** = in onore a
- **bracingly** = in modo incoraggiante
- **buzz** = fermento
- **undo** = disfare, annullare
- **ready-to-wear** = pronti per l'uso
- **Bouquet** = mazzo
- **raunchy** = indecente, osceno
- **kept woman** = mantenuta