The History of the Grasse Perfume Industry

a report by
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Origins

The town of Grasse holds a very special place in the area of France known as the 'balcony of the Côte d'Azur'. This town's many diverse activities have ensured it a stability that is lacking in the other cities in the Maritime Alps region.

Grasse remains an important industrial town today, thanks to the perfume industry and other recently established, associated industries. As the most populated town in the region, Grasse is home to the state, legal and economic administrations for the Provence area in the Maritime Alps: an important sub-prefecture and court of law.

For two decades, the historic town of Grasse has held a foremost place in the French perfume industry, alongside Paris.

From the middle of the 16th century, the manufacture of alcoholic perfumes became very important and the growing habit of wearing perfume led to a high demand for the aromatic ingredients. Two towns were important then:

- Montpellier – famous for its medical and pharmaceutical schools. The town's overly harsh climate prevented the inhabitants from growing the plant-based substances needed for perfume locally.

- Grasse – a free and rich consular town and the economic capital of eastern Provence that profited from an exceptional microclimate and a considerable amount of livestock – which were very useful for tanning. Indeed, from the 16th century onwards, the city effectively specialised in tanning. The evolution of the leather industry was used as a basis for that of perfume – and Grasse was to quickly gain a dominant place in the latter.

The perfume industry developed in the 17th century with a fashion for scented leathers. The main plants required were: jasmine, which came from India from 1650 onwards; roses, cultivated in Grasse from 1650; and the tuberose, which arrived from Italy in around 1670.

The 17th Century

It was probably around the middle of the 17th century that the cultivation of plants for perfume production in this region intensified. The aromatic plants they used included roses, jasmine and tuberoses.

Grasse in the 18th Century

The Association of Perfumed Glovemakers, whose first statutes date from 1724 and were approved by the parliament of Provence on 11 February 1729, brought together 21 manufacturers in 1724 and as many as 70 in 1745. Gloves were scented not only for refinement, but also to remove stubborn odours from the skin. When the fashion for scented gloves passed away, Grasse kept its perfumes. On the eve of the Revolution, Grasse had definitively overtaken Montpellier in the industry and had assembled all the elements of its future prosperity: trade in the raw materials, imported mainly from Italy and the Mediterranean; the cultivation of flowers on a vast scale; and the first factories and sales networks, which had already been established throughout Europe.

The 18th century saw a decline in the demand for leather, due to the heavy taxation weighing on this activity and to customers' growing indifference. On the other hand, the perfume industry saw an important and rapid growth: the 18th century represents the era of perfume. However, the revolution in 1789 delivered a tangible blow to the industry.

19th Century

1800–1850

Next, the industrial revolution intervened, redefining the future of the perfume industry. Grasse progressed from craftsmanship to industry when it began to specialise in producing the raw materials for perfumery and adapted the principles borne of the industrial revolution to fit this activity. The 1850s saw a total conquest of the world markets for Grasse, but also the beginning of the growth of aromatic plants in the region.

Under King Louis-Philippe (1830–1848), most of the elements necessary for transforming the manufacture of perfume into an industrial activity were brought together in Grasse, with the exception of the technology.

1850–1950

The 1850s saw a transformation of lifestyles and an upheaval in financial activities. This change was closely linked to the rapid rise of science and the progress that was occurring in all of the sciences at that time. Until then, the idea of perfume had amounted to something like a photograph of flowers: roses, violets, jasmine or, better, a freshly gathered bouquet.

The growing success of perfume expanded the need for fresh plant extracts. That is why, in a few years, the surrounding countryside became covered in perfumed plants of a universally acknowledged high standard. Country-dwellers, but also perfume manufacturers, bought immense fields in the area. From here, the perfume makers conquered foreign markets. The 19th century represented the era of colonisation and the division of the world by Europeans. Also at this time, perfume companies installed their factories at the edge of the town, in the disused convents that were closed down during the French Revolution.

It is at this point that Grasse moved into the industrial phase, by specialising in the raw materials of perfume and adapting the principles of the industrial revolution to suit this process. These were the two essential factors that led Grasse into the industrial dimension. The industrial revolution put synthetic substances – original reproductions of natural materials already used in perfume – at the disposal of perfume manufacturers at very low prices. Perfume making in Grasse then underwent an important development. It expanded to new sites – in 1846 there were 46 perfume producers in Grasse and 12 in the surrounding area; by 1866, there were 65 in Grasse and 14 in the surrounding area.

This phenomenon led to an expansion of the associated craft industries: glass-makers, tinsmiths, cork cutters, ironmongers, printers, haulage contractors, etc. New machinery and new techniques for extraction were invented, including notably the process of perfume extraction with volatile solvents, for which the Grasse-based manufacturer Leon Chiris acquired the first patents in 1894. Chiris established factories in several French colonies, beginnning with Boufarik in Algeria, from 1836. Next, in China (musk), Tonkin (star anise), South Vietnam (benzoin), Indonesia and the West Indies, the Philippines (patchouli and citronella), the Comoros Islands and Madagascar (ylang-ylang, vanilla vetiver, lemongrass and cinnamon).

Colonisation

By 1932, according to the international review *Les parfums de Grasse*, published in Grasse by Chiris, the Chiris establishments had been alone in producing perfume for several decades.

- Factory locations included Grasse, Reggio and Messina in Calabria, Avola in Sicily, Boufarik in Algeria, Sousse in Tunisia, Ouaka in Congo, Antalaha in Madagascar, Moheli in the Comoro Islands, Saint-Denis in the Bourbon Islands, Cayenne in Guyanne and Chung King and Shanghaï in China.

- Office locations included Bordeaux, Marseilles, Lyon, Paris, Geneva, Milan, Brussels, Prague, Vienna, Warsaw, Moscow, Hamburg, London, Barcelona, Lisbon, Bucharest, Trieste, Constantinople, Tunis, Oran, Algiers, Casablanca, Cairo, Montreal, New York, Chicago, Rio de Janeiro, Saint Paul (Brazil), Santiago and Buenos Aires.

The Influence of the Industrial Revolution

The 1850s were marked by the appearance of the steam engine, iron, cast-iron and steel and the development of organic chemistry, all of which had a great impact on the perfume industry. Distillation by direct vapour injection was in use at Hugues Aîné around 1860.

New techniques of extraction also appeared. A process called enfleurage, involving the washing of a scented pomade with alcohol, was carried out from the beginning of the 19th century. The introduction of the process of extraction by volatile solvents was the most important development. The first tests of this technique were undertaken with ether, which turned out to be too flammable.

In 1869, Naudin developed a powerful apparatus to extract and distil solvents containing odorous substances, with little risk of intoxication or explosion. At the same time, the production of benzene (discovered in 1825) was mastered and Roure carried out the first tests of its application. In 1873, Louis Maximin Roure presented to the international exhibition of Vienna a new system for total concentration of an extract, allowing the quintessence of the natural perfume of flowers to be obtained in an extremely reduced volume. In 1894, Leon Chiris acquired patents for the extraction of perfume using volatile solvents.

The industrial revolution also marked the arrival of industrial organic synthesis, which put the following

synthetic substances at the disposal of perfume makers at very reasonable prices:

- coumarin, which was discovered in 1868 in Peking and comes from the Tonka broad bean, which in turn belongs to the family of ferns of which Jiky forms part. Before Jiky, the application of coumarin had been started by Houbigant for Fougère Royal in 1882;
- heliotropin in 1869;
- vanillin around 1874; and
- ionones in 1898 by Tilman and Kriger, and notably Violetta Vera de Piver or Origan de Coty, in 1905, from which emerged a range of ambergris, flowered and spiced scents. Before ionone, violet leaves were used, the flower itself producing a yield that was too weak. Most 'violet extracts' were actually just tincture of iris root mixed with extract of cassie, rose and tuberose, which ended up closely resembling the aroma of violets.

The 19th Century

Between the Wars

The development of the perfume industry explains the creation of the first employers' federation in 1898 – the 'Trade Union of Perfume Makers and Distillers of the Maritime Alps' was worth a total of €5.5 million. In 1945, it was renamed the 'National Trade Union of the Manufacturers and Suppliers of Essential Oils and Natural Aromatic Products'. These rapidly expanding perfume factories were family-run factories directed by industry leaders, who were often memorable characters. They were frequently quiet, keen workers, relentlessly economical and very individualistic. They were also great travellers, since they were constantly controlling their foreign assets and establishing new subsidiary companies abroad. In addition, they were important political figures – good examples are Leon Chiris or Jean Amic, who were both senators of the Maritime Alps. This was the golden age of perfumery in Grasse, but for the local producers of aromatic plants, it was the beginning of the end.

First of all, the production was exceptional, but very quickly, foreign competition led to a decline in the production of aromatic raw materials, as can be seen from the following comparison:

- in 1939, a bouquet of roses from Bulgaria cost €1,800;
- one bought from Grasse in the same year cost €4,270;
- a bouquet of Italian jasmine cost €1,000; and
- the Grasse equivalent cost 1,800.

Nevertheless, the poor quality of these foreign materials had the effect of slowing down this decline. "In Grasse, a bouquet of jasmine is at once both the fullest of bloom and the lightest, because it is here that one best finds the odour of the flowering jasmine bush, such as we could smell it in the countryside of Grasse," explains Edmond Roudnitska.[1]

Production would continue to develop until in the 1930s, before declining once more. From 1930, local production perished in the face of foreign competition and, later, the introduction of synthesis.

The Second World War

During the Second World War, Grasse was doubly isolated from the perfume industry:

- it was deprived of the largest part of its non-local supply sources; and

- it was cut off from its principal customers, such as the US, which took the opportunity to equip itself with a cutting-edge chemical industry (thanks to Grasse chemists living in the US and the arrival of foreign chemists, notably Germans and Jews).

It was therefore necessary for Grasse to reconquer the market and also to conquer others. In the 1950s, Grasse still controlled 95% of the world market in natural raw aromatic materials, which passed in transit through Grasse, where they were altered. However, the perfume makers of Grasse increased the value of these materials considerably, and their clients ended up buying the materials directly from the countries where they were produced.

The Present Day, or the Silent Revolution (1950–1982)

The 1950s marked a period of major changes. While the organic chemistry industry made enormous progresses, the perfume makers of Grasse remained stagnant. In 1933, Louis Roure had already written the following report: "It is infinitely regrettable to be obliged to recognise the error committed by Grasse in neglecting to forceably apply the discipline of chemistry to working on the flowers." By neglecting chemistry, Grasse lost the initiative of applied research and technological innovation.

The 1960s

In the 1960s, synthetic materials began to compete very seriously with natural products, while the perfume makers of Grasse were still extolling the

1. *E Roudnitska (1974),* L'intimité du parfum, *Editions Olivier Perrin, p. 69*

virtues of natural products. In addition, natural products were taxed more and more heavily and were cheaper in the countries where they were produced, because of the lower cost of labour in these countries.

At this time, a change in demand occurred: a great consumer demand for perfume products appeared, which led to middle-range products being created, which had been ignored until then by the people of Grasse (including products for supermarkets and the developing world).

From the 1960s onwards, there was a boom in the food flavourings industry and the perfume makers of Grasse would involve themselves considerably in this field. Grasse therefore shifted from the production of finished products to that of half-finished ones.

The aromatic industries underwent a major crisis in the 1960s. They lost control of the international market in raw materials and the products of Grasse suffered from competition with synthetic perfumes.

> *"One after another, the companies of Grasse are being bought by multinationals, which is to say they are being integrated into international groups, with their own strategies of development or repositioning, work habits and a specific culture of enterprise."* (G Lubeigt, 1979)

> *"This economic crisis is doubling up as an identity crisis: Grasse is no longer the world capital of perfumery, but a 'pawn' on the chessboard of the fine chemical industries. What will become of the companies that have pledged allegiance to interests that pass them by?"* (H de Fontmichel, 1984)

As the 1960s progressed, the capital started to change hands. The large international pharmaceutical companies had already been trying to control the Grasse perfume industry for a long time, attracted by its prestige. Thus, 70% of this industry became owned by groups foreign to Grasse:

- Before 1964: Camilli Albert Laloue: Pfizer;
- 1964: Bertrand Frères, Unilever Roure Bertrand and Hoffman La Roche;
- 1966: Chiris: UOP;
- 1975: Schmoller Bompard/ J Sozio and Protex;
- 1980: Lautier and Florasynth, which already owned Isnard Maubert;
- 1981: Tombarel and Sanofi; and
- 1982: Méro Boyveau and Sanofi.

Grasse Today

Today one of the towns in France with the highest salary per inhabitant (around €10,000), Grasse owes this result mainly to the internationally recognised quality of the natural essences produced in the Grasse factories and, consequently, to their high price. As the crossroads of all paths, Grasse was incontestably, up until the 1950s, the international capital of the perfume industry: there is not a flower in the world, not a bud, not a root of which the Grassois did not try to capture the fragrance, in order to to mix it with a thousand others in their subtle compositions. This aromatic town, defined in its entirety – industrially, economically and socially – for working on the aromatic raw materials grown in Grasse and the surrounding areas, composed of about fifteen companies that have now been integrated into large, competing international groups and several small and medium-sized companies... has not been dismantled, as one might have feared. The new owners have on occasions invested a lot of money in bringing the production equipment of Grasse up to date. However, the introduction of new technology, the reworking of qualifications and the changing methods of managing staff have accelerated the upheaval in this industry.

> *"Initially regarded as a by-product of perfumery, the food flavourings sector is furthermore developing, as the farming industry progresses, to represent a third of the sales turnover on our products for about the past 30 years."* (P Rasse, 1987)

Today, Grasse is leading the field in aromatic products of natural origin, for alcoholic drinks as well as for food. Indeed, people today live in a scented world, whether it be a matter of the toothpaste on a toothbrush in the morning, a strawberry yoghurt or a marmalade that tastes of the same fruit, not forgetting cleaning products that provide an odour of freshness, the new-leather smell of a car or that of pastries on trips to the supermarket, and so on. Every year, the industry makes more than €4,000 million from aromatic products, including 54% from exports (among others, Central and Eastern Europe makes up 44.5% of exports, the US 9.5% and Japan 3.8%). The aromatic town employs a total of more than 2,700 employees, including a high proportion of senior executives (14%) and junior staff (17% of technicians and supervisors). If it formed just one company, its sales turnover would put it in third place in the world, behind the North American group International Fragrance and the Swiss group Hoffman La Roche.

Since 1950, the perfume industry has been through two long, difficult periods following oil problems: 1974–1975 and 1980, two periods during which the clients of Grasse perfume companies left their sales to plummet and lived on their own stocks.

Today, Grasse is one of the four international centres of modern perfumery, occupying a select position in the production, treatment and trade of products intended for perfumes, cosmetics and food. n