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LORENZO VILLORESI: THE WORLD-CHAMPION NOSE

By Lucy Gordan
Photos by Jacques Gavard

Florence, November 27, 2006

On Thanksgiving Florentine perfumer Lorenzo Villoresi received the François Coty prize at the Chateau d'Ertigny in the Loire Valley and was crowned *Le Roi des Nez* or "The King of the Noses", surpassing all his French competitors on their home turf and at the profession they long-boasted to be their national exclusive. In all fairness Villoresi is not the first Italian to be awarded this prize, but the others were multi-nationals, never before an independent perfumer.



photo ©jacques.gavard@mac.com

Today fragrances (including Villoresi's) are sold all over the world in duty-frees, department stores, and specialty shops, but perfume has a history as ancient as Egypt, where tomb remains reveal the use of fragrant ointments and oils. Avicenna, a 10th-century Arab physician and philosopher, is said to have discovered the distillation process that greatly reduced the cost of making the essential oils used in perfumery, and knowledge of distillation spread through Europe during the Middle Ages as the Crusaders returned with samples of Arab essences.



Four Generations of Villoresi

photo ©jacques.gavard@mac.com

The first modern perfume, made of scented oils blended in an alcohol solution, was made in 1370 at the command of Queen Elizabeth of Hungary and was known throughout Europe as Hungary Water. The art of perfumery prospered in Renaissance Florence -- even Leonardo da Vinci was an expert in distillation, especially of laurel -- and in the 16th century Florentine culinary and perfumery refinements were taken to Paris by Catherine de' Medici, the young bride of the future French King Henry II, and her personal perfumer, Renato Bianco. Thus France quickly became the European center of perfume manufacture it still is today.

"The burning of incense that accompanied the religious rites of ancient China, Palestine, and Egypt led gradually to the personal use of perfume," explains Lorenzo Villoresi, who in his acceptance speech compared himself to a panda, because he too is a beast from the past who resists the frenetic pace of modern life and the drive to be "in fashion." He considers himself an alchemist and a disciple of both Avicenna and of fellow-Florentine Catherine de' Medici. A 50-year-old cosmopolitan gourmet, Villoresi has combined his love of history, travel, and spicy cuisine into the unusual esoteric profession of perfumer.

As a post-graduate researcher in philosophy, Villoresi travelled widely in the Far and Middle East: India, Israel, Jordan, Sinai, the Red Sea, and Egypt. Here he felt particularly at home, undoubtedly because during the early 1950s his parents had owned a boutique of Florentine artisanry at King Farouk's Court.

"I still love to wander endlessly in Khartoum's Omdurman, Old Jerusalem's and Cairo's bazaars searching for essences and spices. Cairo is the best place in the world to learn about perfume production," explains Villoresi, who began his career concocting fragrances first as a hobby for friends and then for Fendi (scented candles), Armani, and Trussardi. Now, although his products for the home and bath are sold at London's Fortnum & Mason, New York's Bergdorf and Barney's, San Francisco's Gumps, and Isetan in Tokyo, Villoresi prefers to create personalized or "signature" perfumes.

Starting at around \$150, usually Villoresi's one-of-a-kind fragrances cost only a little bit more than a brand name and the formula -- a secret -- remains exclusive to its wearer. Some essences, such as cinnamon, nutmeg, sandalwood oils, and citrus flavors are quite inexpensive. The most precious essence -- and therefore perfumes made with it -- is iris root, which at \$35,000 per kilo is more valuable than gold.

Villoresi has counted among his 400 regular clients Jackie Kennedy Onassis, supermodel Linda Evangelista, fashion designer Roberto Capucci, Cherie Blair, Sting, Jodorowky, and Madonna. Most people come alone and in one sitting choose summer, winter, morning and evening fragrances; only 5% come as couples, though everyone's common goal is "sexual attraction."

"When Catherine de' Medici left Florence for France in the 1550s, and introduced the art of

making perfumes to the French, the most popular fragrance was woodbine, a fragrant honeysuckle flower: every Florentine wore it," says Villoresi, whose older sister Cristina offers week-long cooking courses at the family's splendidly-frescoed 28-room Hotel Villa Villoresi, a Renaissance country house six miles northwest of Florence (Via Ciampi 2, Colonnata di Sesto Fiorentino, 50019, tel. 011-39-055-443212, FAX 011-39-055-442063, e-mail: cvillor@tin.it or ILAVilloresi@ila-chateau.com), where Lorenzo creates his pot-pourri and home essences, "my way to help you personalize your environment."

"During the Renaissance it was relatively easy to make a perfume. Now it's different. People want to distinguish themselves with a unique perfume -- something designed not only as a personal statement but also as a mood enhancer." Since 1989 Lorenzo Villoresi has dreamed up his scents in an attic with a breath-taking view over the Arno and Renaissance Florence. Surrounded by some 1,000 small colored bottles bearing such intriguing labels as "sea breeze," "freshly cut grass" and "damp hay," with his charming wife Ludovica he begins by asking about his client's favorite smells. Then there is the sniffing session. "The power of smell is really incredible" he explains. "Lots of memories and emotions can be evoked by a particular essence. My nose or the client's nose is not the end-all and the be-all. A perfume is born in the brain." This complex olfactory psychoanalysis lasts an average of two to three hours and usually costs around \$1,200 including "your very own" perfume. The quantity of each essence is then carefully recorded in a personal file, making reorders simple.

"An Arab emir once asked me for a fragrance that evoked a horse at full gallop. However, the most unusual request I ever created," Villoresi chuckles, "was for an English lady who wanted to immortalize the scent of her recently deceased beloved dog. I must have been successful because as soon as she left all the stray dogs in the neighborhood started howling and following her down the street."

When creating a personal perfume, Villoresi usually blends 30 to 40 essences of the 100 or so sniffed. "Combining essences is like composing music," he explains. "A perfume is created from different notes that take some time to play out. It is like a symphony, but I don't make your perfume. You use me to make the perfume you want. It is very personal and reflects who you are, who you think you are, and who you would like to be. No other person does exactly what I do."

For an appointment at Via Bardi 14, Florence, phone -39-055-2341187, FAX -39-55-2345893, or e-mail: info@lorenzovilloresi.it. In addition to custom fragrances, you can purchase Villoresi's over-the-counter line of perfumes, pot-pourri, lotions, and soaps, which were produced with fashion designer Giorgio Armani, some of which are available from e-bay or other websites, if you google Lorenzo Villoresi. His newest, "ALAMUT," launched at the end of 2006 in a ruby red crystal bottle with a sterling silver label and top, has a sumptuous Oriental scent of rare and precious woods, Tonkin Musk, and amber.

Starting later this year you'll be able to visit and study at Villoresi's latest brainchild: The Perfume Academy, which will open in a Renaissance palace not far from his laboratory. In addition to courses and seminars offered by the world's greatest "nez," it will include a perfume museum, a "perfume laboratory," a garden of tropical plants, and a small hammam.

Before leaving Florence, another must for perfume-lovers is the beautifully-frescoed *Farmacia di Santa Maria Novella* at Via della Scala 16r, -39-055-216276. In this ethereal setting, Dominican fathers still produce perfume and other beauty products, including lotions for every skin type, according to their order's Renaissance formulas. Not to mention *Antica Farmacia di San Marco* at Via Cavour 146, tel. -39-055-210604, also founded in the 15th century, with its vaulted frescoed ceilings and rows of majolica jars. Their specifics include an anti-hysterical popular with English expatriate ladies during the 19th century, and excellent rose water and *eaux de cologne*.

Then, to learn still more about the history of perfume and its production, follow in the footsteps of a certain Renato Tombarelli, a Florentine chemist, like Bianco, in Catherine de' Medici's entourage. He settled in Grasse and, in part, thanks to his initiative, this charming and peaceful town nestled in the hills above Cannes on the French Riviera has become the modern perfume capital of the world.

Nicknamed "the city of flowers," its omnipresent fragrances and flowers are celebrated twice a year: at the Rose Expo during the last week of May and August's Jasmine Festival. During the rest of the year four of Grasse's 30 perfume factories offer hour-long guided tours during which the techniques of perfume-making are explained. For more indepth study, at the International Perfumery Museum (Place du Cours 8, tel. 011-33-93-368020, Open everyday, except public

holidays, between June 1 and September 30 from 10AM-7PM; and from 10AM-noon and 2-5 PM October 1-May 31, except closed Mondays, Tuesdays, public holidays and the month of November) all the secrets of perfume are revealed: from the processing of raw materials from the museum's very own greenhouse (creation of essences, distillation, extraction) to the production of perfume itself. On display are a rare collection of antique utensils and perfume bottles from ancient Egypt to the present, including Marie Antoinette's travel case. The nearby Fragonard (Boulevard Fragonard 23, tel. 001-33-93360161) and Molinard Museums (Boulevard Victor Hugo 60, tel. 011-33-93-360162, FAX: 011-33-93-360391) both have fine collections of bottles, labels, and documents on the history of perfumery through the ages. Fragonard is the elegant 17th-century country house of the famous court painter Jean-Honoré Fragonard, and Molinard's offers two different courses: *Studio Volatile* and *Studio Fixateur* to measure your aptitude for becoming *un nez* or a nose. For a hands-on experience, after a tour of the Parfumerie Galimard, you can create your own personal fragrance and receive a certificate as "Honorary Master Perfumer." It's great fun even if your nose is not up to Villoresi's sniff!