

What to buy for the person with everything? Bespoke perfume

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December 4 2010 12:01AM

It's Christmas, you're wearing Dior's *J'adore* and the festivities are just getting under way when — *quelle horreur!* — a guest turns up with the same fragrance.

If that doesn't strike you as an appalling humiliation, you probably are not a jet-setting socialite with a seven-figure bank balance. But if you are, help is at hand, courtesy of French creators offering what they describe as the ultimate in luxury — custom-made perfumes.

The latest trend among the ultra-rich in Paris is for personalised flacons designed to correspond to your tastes and life history — a whiff of your childhood, or perhaps a scent evoking your first encounter with your partner.

You need money (£25,000 or so for a small bottle), patience (delivery times range from six months to two years) and few inhibitions (you will have to reveal intimate details of your past to end up with a fragrance *juste comme il faut*).

Sounds pretentious? That's the point, according to business consultants who say that the global spread of wealth — there are now ten million millionaires in the world — has left French perfumers in particular, and the country's luxury goods industry in general, with a problem. In 1953, Marilyn Monroe sent a frisson through her male admirers by explaining what she wore in bed. "Why, Chanel No 5, of course," she said. Today, the perfume is widely bought — it costs £50 or so for 50ml — which has singularly reduced its appeal to the rich and famous.

"They don't want to wear something which is worn by everyone else," said Pierre-François Le Louet, the chairman of Nelly Rodi, a Paris-based consultancy. "It is the principle of haute couture extended to perfumes." Guerlain, Cartier, Jean Patou and Hermès are among the prestigious French luxury houses offering the service, which connoisseurs described as a return to the origins of *la haute parfumerie*.

"Perfumes always used to be custom-made for royals and suchlike," said Nicolas Olczyk, a consultant in Paris. "It's only relatively recently that they have been democratised — in the past 50 years or so."

"We are really just going back to our roots," said a spokeswoman for Guerlain, which now offers a personalised 500ml bottle for £31,000. You start with an appointment, more usually several, with Sylvaine Delacourt, the director of perfume development, who will question you about the smells that have been most significant to you. It could be the wooden desk at school, or your grandmother's shawl or a soap from your youth. She then asks you to choose from a selection of images, such as washing hanging on a line, a forest or flaked chocolate. Finally, she gets you to sniff a range of scents.

The information is passed to Thierry Wasser, Guerlain's "nose", who will develop your fragrance in his laboratory.

Sales are not exactly high — half a dozen a year at Guerlain. But that is what its customers, who include wealthy Russians and Lebanese, want. "This is something exceptional, something to make people dream," said Mr Olczyk.

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