

Q&A CÉLINE ROUX AND MATHILDE BIJAOU MYRRH & TONKA COLOGNE INTENSE

CELINE ROUX, FRAGRANCE DIRECTOR, JO MALONE LONDON

What was the inspiration behind the fragrance?

The idea of Namibia, with its sand dunes and warm desert colours, conjured up the romance and emotion of faraway lands. Myrrh felt like the perfect note to use for a new and innovative Cologne Intense. Once enriched with the note of tonka, the fragrance gives a real sense of richness, travel and escape.

The Cologne Intense collection works with rare, ritualistic ingredients; what makes Myrrh & Tonka an ideal addition to this collection?

Both the myrrh and the tonka have a decadent and addictive quality that chimes with the Cologne Intense concept of rarity and opulence. I felt that the collection was missing a fully warm, sensual and rounded Oriental feel. We do already have a resinous incense note elsewhere in the collection, in Incense and Cedrat, but it's cut through with a citrus that amplifies the fresh nature of the Incense. However for Myrrh & Tonka, we headed in the opposite direction and reinforced the richness of the resin rather than trying to contrast it. Even though the final fragrance is deep, it stays true to our philosophy of simplicity and clarity; that's because it's a short formula with very few extra ingredients, making it easy to layer with our existing fragrances through our Fragrance Combining™ ritual.

How was the Myrrh harvested?

We wanted to go to the source of the myrrh and I had the privilege of travelling to Namibia to be part of the harvesting process. It's a long, long journey and, once there, it feels like a very distant land. Once we landed in the country, it was another eight hours travelling into the mountains to get to our destination. The trees they collect the myrrh from are called Omumbiri trees – they seem almost dead when you look at them as they grow in the dryness of the desert. But a few times a year the trees produce a sap that comes out like a resin; it's a mechanism that the tree harnesses to fight potential bacteria, and the myrrh has a wonderful purity to it because of the altitude and climate.

Accumulating the resin is a ritualistic process in itself. The sap is very gluey so traditionally they would cut the tree trunks to get it. But in this region, to preserve the tree, they don't touch it at all: they wait until it's become dry and either scrape it from the tree or they wait until it falls off. With their method there's no waste, the trees aren't damaged and the whole experience is very simple and clean. And because of the nature of the crystals you can keep them for a week or two, unlike flowers that you have to work with immediately as they're so fragile.

I've never seen something so beautifully uncomplicated.

How is this particular Myrrh's aroma different to other varieties?

Myrrh can be fresh and lemony but the Namibian variety has a unique warm quality. We worked with the perfumer Serge Majoullier at MANE who transformed the essence into a resinoid exclusive to Jo Malone London. Through our unique extraction process, we pushed certain notes to make the myrrh even warmer, with a hint of sensuality and liquorice.

What led you to work with Tonka Bean, and not a more contrasting note like in most Jo Malone London creations?

Myrrh has an addictive quality and we felt it was a shame to cut it. We did originally try to do that game of contrasts, which is a very signature concept for Jo Malone London, but it really didn't work for this. We tried a citrus, a dried wood, a dried fruit note.... but they were clashing rather than complementary. So we thought about tonka. It really worked, delivering a beautifully sensual mood to the fragrance.

Why was Mathilde Bijaoui chosen as the perfumer to work with on this specific fragrance?

I knew Mathilde was the right fit because of the way in which she writes formulas is simple and direct; and for a fragrance with two deep, complex base notes it was important to find someone with a light touch.

She got that 'sensuality' just right from very early on in the process.

Within the Cologne Intense collection, what family does Myrrh & Tonka sit amongst?

We don't have an 'Oriental' category as such, so I would place this in the spicy-woody family. And this rich, slightly smoky, sophisticated scent suits both men and women beautifully.

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MATHILDE BIJAOU, PERFUMER

What were your initial thoughts on the brief Jo Malone London provided for this scent?

First of all, working with Jo Malone London was so wonderful in itself: when I was first asked me to work on the myrrh project I was so excited and honoured. Jo Malone London has a strong signature process of creative development - every perfumer I know would like to work with them because of the immersive collaboration. I really loved the story of the myrrh and how it is harvested, and it was exciting to work with the exclusive resinoid that smelt so unique. Tonka is one of my favourite ingredients too, so it was such a wonderful combination to play with. My style of having short formulas, clarity and simplicity was a great fit for this particular fragrance.

What was your first impression of this particular Myrrh note?

In this perfume we have two different extractions of the myrrh. One is the essential oil, which is made from a distillation. And the other is the exclusive resinoid from Namibia made by Serge Majoullier, which is an extract with solvent. The essential oil has a more uplifting scent than other myrrhs from Africa. It's more immediate, more bracing and a bit spicier. The resinoid meanwhile is very complex and has so many facets that it's almost a perfume on its own. It has a resinous effect like incense, but it's a bit warmer and woodier. It reminds me of caramelised sugar, maple syrup and sun-baked tree sap.

What does Tonka Bean bring to the fragrance and why was this chosen?

Tonka is one of my favourite ingredients, not just for perfumery but for cooking too. It's an edible, addictive and gourmande note without being sickly-sweet. It helps to give a natural balsamic 'oriental' note to the myrrh, and a feeling of sophistication and strength to the fragrance, which is so important for the Cologne Intense collection. That feeling of addiction and carnal richness is very much down to the tonka. And I love that it's not too feminine. In fact most masculine 'fougere' fragrances include tonka, so overall this definitely appeals to both men and women.

How would you describe Myrrh & Tonka as it warms and develops on the skin?

Right at the top there is a hint of lavender and a little floral to make the opening effect comforting and voluptuous.

The big, rich heart and base note of myrrh is sensual and balsamic, with hints of amber and liquorice. And the tonka brings generosity. There is also a touch of vanilla, cypriol and gaiac wood, which together deliver a smoky tobacco note to the perfume.

It's a fragrance that's quite linear: that means that from the top to the bottom it more or less stays the same.

It's very stable in its evolution, and that's something quite rare in perfumery.

It's sensual and addictive, captivating and mesmerising.

Where did you look for inspiration while creating this fragrance?

I was obsessed with the colours and landscapes of the desert and dunes. The sandy ochre and reddish brown palette, paired with dark shadows and sweeping scenery – it's so remote and evocative. This association with colour was really important to me during the creative process. The tonka bean is naturally black, and the myrrh crystals are slightly reddish, slightly golden and ochre – it all felt so natural and the perfect combination for a fragrance.