

CHRISTOPHE LAUDAMIEL



MAVERICK AND MAGICIAN

JO FAIRLEY
Zooms with a talented perfumer, 'scent sculptor' and author of a controversial fragrance manifesto, who is out to change the perfume world for good

IT'S NEVER EASY chatting with Christophe Laudamiel. First off, I swear he has some kind of electric life-force that crashes Zoom calls, jinxes Instagram Lives and generally makes transatlantic communication between The Perfume Society HQ and this perfumer's New York lab technologically challenging. (For this conversation alone, we had about seven attempts. During some of them, Christophe's phone was angled so that all I could see was a glimpse of his Mohican.)

Secondly, for anyone who's been trained to think about fragrance in a conventional way, the ideas Christophe has for shaking up the perfume world take a while to sediment down, into the brain. For instance: his proposal that perfume companies be more transparent about a bottle's fragrance ingredients, on their websites – as some fashion and candle companies have started to be in the past few years. Or the notion that we should always buy perfume from perfumers, not from fashion or clothing brands – 'in the same way you buy fashion from fashion designers, music from musicians.'

But if ever this industry was ready for a shake-up, it's surely right now. In 2020, all bets are off: how we work, where we do it, how fragrances are created and sold and enjoyed. And whether or not you agree with all his disruptive ideas, one thing is certain: here's a man who seeks to hold up a mirror to the perfume world, and question everything done in homage to Perfumery ('with a capital P', as he puts it). He's also on a mission to get everyone outside the perfume business – the man, woman and child in the street – to focus more on scents and smells, in order to get greater pleasure out of the world and out of life itself. Which, in that respect, puts us shoulder-to-shoulder with Christophe on the soapbox.

Master perfumer Christophe Laudamiel's Wikipedia page scrolls on for days. Here's a man who, before he became a perfumer, won the French National Chemistry Olympiads, in 1986. Who completely shook up the laundry market with his innovation of Lenor Cherry Blossom, Ariel and Gain, delivering new patented freshness; in 1999 he received Procter & Gamble's Special Recognition Awards for his innovative work with fabric softeners, as well as his discoveries of new fragrance molecules and technologies.

Christophe then went on to study fine fragrance with master perfumers Pierre Bourdon, Carlos Benaim, Sophia

LIBERTÉ, ÉGALITÉ, FRAGRANCITÉ

a fragrance manifesto

by master perfumer *Christophe Laudamiel*

Grojsman and Pierre Wargnye, winning 2003's FIFI for 'Fragrance Star of the Year' – one of so many awards, over the years. Several of his creations – Polo Blue and Abercrombie & Fitch Fierce (co-created with Carlos Benaïm) – remained top 10 sellers for more than a decade. Describing himself as a 'scent sculptor', one of Christophe's most fascinating projects was the creation of smells inspired by Patrick Süskind's novel-turned-movie, *Perfume*, which included 'the stench of streets in 18th Century Paris.'

Today, as well as working his scent wizardry for big commercial clients through his lab – which is equipped by IFF – Christophe is involved in

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two niche ventures: Strangelove (with Elizabeth Gaynes and Helena Christensen), and his own perfume house, The Zoo. On The Zoo website, visitors are asked to agree with this statement before entering the site: 'I align myself 100% in support of human rights and am committed to speaking out: for justice, for freedom, for equal

protection of all communities.' And if you don't agree, I'd respectfully suggest you go elsewhere – though you'll miss out on the excellent info on how to improve your sense of smell, as well as how to 'read' a perfume label.

On the Zoo website, you'll also find his open 'Dear Santa' to Leonard Lauder, with a wishlist that includes an Estée Lauder Building at Columbia University as 'a centre for olfactory education and excellence to promote academic scent education across disciplines' (he points out that the public and Nobel Prize winners alike know more about coffee, wine, golf and cheese than they know about their own nose). And a Leonard Lauder Building of Olfactory Technology and Electronics for Motion Pictures, Theatre and Publishing', pointing out that these fields are all 'at an olfactory kindergarten level'. Beyond that, he'd like to see The Jane Lauder Department of Smell Vocabulary, Theory & Ethics at Radcliffe College (named after another senior Estée Lauder corporation executive/family member): 'Scientists and theoreticians are desperate to develop a vocabulary specific to olfaction. Do, Re, Mi, Fa, So, La, Ti, Do; blue, orange, green, yellow; Pantone codes – no such system exists in perfumery, to date,' he says. And so it goes on; I can thoroughly recommend taking a few minutes of your life to read to the end.

Christophe has also published 'A Fragrance Manifesto' – the gloriously named 'Liberté, Egalité, Fragrancité', its title a play on the French national motto. With passion infused into every single line, it strives for greater inclusivity, transparency, opportunity. Lots of blue-sky thinking, for sure. Lots of cage-rattling suggestions. (Read elements of it, overleaf.)

But mostly, the manifesto embodies Christophe's dream of a world that pays more attention to our precious sense of smell, rescuing it from the status, so perfectly expressed by Helen Keller, as 'the fallen angel of our senses.' (It is surely no coincidence that his company is called DreamAir.) 'I've had a lot of positive feedback from other perfumers and niche brands,' he says, about the manifesto, adding that there are groups in certain institutions now pondering how some aspects could be implemented.

On one level, he's clearly hugely proud of the industry. In terms of ►

sustainability, Christophe explains: 'Perfume has been sustainable since the 80s. Safe ingredients, no more child labour, respect for women, no pollution, no exploitation of the land. In fact, he says, 'Perfumery has now entered the age of super-sustainability – patchouli crops monitored by GPS, water pumps in villages where they plant vanilla or patchouli, chemical engineering techniques exported from Grasse transparently, to farmers around the world.'

On the subject of inclusivity, meanwhile, he was very outspoken at the time of Black Lives Matter, grasping the opportunity to help bring about change on a societal level. 'Even at school I was the person in class who would defend the person who was less fortunate. I'm someone who comes from a lower middle class background myself, but when something isn't fair, I have to do something.'

Within the fragrance industry, Christophe does see signs of change, in terms of increased opportunity. 'The programmes at the leading fragrances houses – IFF, Givaudan, Robertet, Mane, Firmenich and Symrise – have been opened up to Asian and Hispanic/ Brazilian students for many years, now. The industry is very well aware that the Black American and African populations are not well-represented at all; two years ago, Givaudan and IFF have started to focus specifically on Africa and Black America, and The Institute of Art & Olfaction in LA now offers classes to become perfumers, specifically for people who have trouble entering other institutions.'

On a personal level, Christophe has himself been training future perfumers in Nigeria since February this year, donating his fee to Paris's Osmothèque (the world's custodian of fragrances) to further the dreams of young Africans to work in fragrance. But one of the fundamental problems, Christophe observes, is that 'many people out there don't even know the job of a perfumer exists – not just in fine fragrance, but also in candles and Downy/Lenor, etc. At the end of the day, I'd like us to have as many perfumers as we have musicians.'

As our Zoom call crashes for the umpteenth time, I can't help but agree. Although of one thing I am also certain: it doesn't matter how many thousands of perfumers there are in the world: there'll only ever be one Christophe Laudamiel. 📧

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THE MANIFESTO

We don't have room to publish all of this here. But with Christophe Laudamiel's kind permission, we bring you some thought-provoking elements from 'Liberté, Egalité, Fragrancité'. Read it in full at thezoonyc.com

1 FIRST, THE PUBLIC SHALL HAVE ACCESS TO REAL INFORMATION

- Children shall be given olfactory education at home and in schools to awaken the senses, communication and intelligence.
- Universities shall open real Perfume Studies departments. University courses shall use smells, fragrance compositions or olfactory science to illustrate their points.
- Top students at top universities shall routinely join the fragrance industry as much as joining the aerospace industry or Wall Street, be it to become perfume diffusion engineers, perfume managers, perfumers, or anything perfume...
- The public shall be made aware that most of us smell well enough, and smell better once we train and start putting our noses everywhere.
- Blind people around the world shall be offered extra olfactory stimuli and enrichment.
- The public shall be taught that the brain gets as much information, pleasure, intelligence and decision power via our noses as via our eyes. By smelling, one doesn't damage one's nose, lungs or brain, as they are made just for that: to smell. Perfumers are not known to have rotten lungs or worn-out noses. Human beings get fresh olfactory cells every 4-6 weeks like sharks get regularly fresh sets of teeth. Smelling doesn't provoke much more allergies than music provokes epilepsy crises. Let's stop the drama coming from ignorance.
- Teachers and psychologists, as well as doctors and nurses, shall walk around with a scent kit. Via smelling sessions, they shall obtain stories patients won't recall by oral or visual questioning. In return patients shall enjoy the healthy brain aerobic called smelling.
- People shall understand that a perfume piano, also called perfumery organ, has about 1,500 keys, also called ingredients or notes, compared to only 88 keys for a musical piano.

2 SECOND, LET'S JUMP TO THE NEXT LEVEL

- Perfumes shall be considered more than accessories. Perfumers shall become again the authority in fragrance design and decisions. Music is not considered an accessory, painting is not considered an accessory.
- The fragrance industry shall recruit, dress, talk and perfume itself in much more colourful and hip ways...
- We shall publicly recognise scent heroes: scientists, botanists and authors who contribute to the development of perfumes, general olfactory knowledge and expansion.

3 THIRD, LET THE EXCITEMENT BEGIN

- It shall be further exposed that perfumers are not just inspired by flowers and the smells of their grandmothers. Smelling can be quirky, punky, sexy, intellectual and much more.
- Publishers shall routinely beef up their paper stories with scented pages and smell inserts. Scent tracks and cartridges shall be provided prior to TV or movie programmes, to accompany them.
- Children shall bring home a scented present, or hide a scented object in their parents' suitcase as a travel amulet. Parents shall hold scent bars and surprises, bring back an unknown scent from an unknown place. These will be unforgettable experiences which mark for life. They enrich culture and diversity, and stretch the imagination.
- The public shall appreciate the sustainable spirit of fragrance. By using fragrances we effectively help 40,000 farmers in Haiti grow vetiver plants. By loving jasmine and violet leaves coming from Egypt as well as orange flowers from Tunisia and Somalia, we help bring children to school and give women jobs. By enjoying vanilla extracts we allow villages in Uganda to afford basic water equipment, whilst using bergamot from Calabria helps to provide jobs to young generations in one of the poorest Italian regions.
- Scents and scenting shall become again core religious and spiritual practices. People shall attend celebrations in churches, mosques, synagogues and temples, as well as practicing yoga, around smelling experiences. It nurtures memory, the sense of togetherness, the sense of whole, and promote extra internal and external communication.

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- 'Girls' shall know thier vanillas and patchoulis as much as their lipsticks. 'Guys' shall know their oudhs and vetiver distillates as much as their wines and whiskies. And exchange 'girls' and 'guys'.
 - Buildings shall in future get several rotating scents over the course of a day, like giving them a soul.
 - A TV show shall be staged to reveal the backstage of perfume sourcing of precious ingredients in remote inaccessible places - because fragrance ingrdients don't grow in downtown Manhattan or inside good old Paris - to show the drama of perfume composition as well as the drama of perfume criticism.
 - Chefs and perfumers shall work together in the same labs, chefs using molecules and patchouli and tuberose and green mandarin essence and much more complex mixtures than just a spice mix, and perfumers using the art of heating, cooking and aging on rose oils, sandalwood, oudh and other immortelle absolutes.

These dreams are actually easy to materialise in the age of today. Let's open our nostrils and go for it.