The art of perfumery in Grasse, France: a three centuries-old craft

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The art of creating perfume stems from the expertise handed down generation after generation for three centuries in Provence's Grasse region, in France. The region's flower growers, raw material processors and perfumers are now mobilising in order for Unesco to recognise this living heritage.

Joseph Mul, 77, is the heir to a flower-growing business created by his great-grandfather in 1840. Every month of May, he supervises the manual harvest of his six hectares of sweetly scented Rosa Centifolia. He is a signature figure in the fields around Grasse, having handed down the family agricultural tradition to his son-in-law, who "caught the bug the day he married my daughter."

At one end of the rows of rosebushes, a huge hangar-factory allows the flowers to be processed within an hour of their harvesting. His manager Jean-François Vieille is an expert in the transformation of the flowers into a ‘concrete’ (the initial solid extract) and then into an ‘absolute’ (the liquid concentrate featured in perfumes) and he is not there by chance. He gladly tells of the influence his perfumer grandfather had on him, associated in his memory to the scent of orange blossoms.

Today, Grasse-born perfumer Olivier Polge has come to extol his new fragrance: a highly floral scent, with notes of orange, mandarin, ylang-ylang, cedar, bergamot and wild jasmine. He describes it as a "new interpretation" of Chanel No. 5, a fragrance that was created nearly a century ago.

Of course, Polge took over just three years ago from his father Jacques, who was a perfumer at Chanel since 1978. "I discovered the craft when I was eighteen, as an apprentice in my father's laboratory, then I learned how to distil raw materials in a Grasse workshop," he said.

The entire industry, linking flowers to perfumes, is still alive miraculously "thanks to the old fragrances, whose ingredients perfumers never wanted to change," says Joseph Mul. He chiefly sells his Rosa Centifolia and his wild jasmine (harvested from August to October) to Chanel, for the fashion label's celebrated No. 5 perfume, under a 10-year contract regularly renewed since 1987.