

THE NOSE JOB

Paul Austin wasn't born behind a fish counter in Les Halles like the 18th century apprentice perfumer in Patrick Suskind's famous novel, *Perfume*, but he does have a strong link to the story; one that has inspired him to create more than beautiful fragrances.

WORDS MARY TAYLOR

PAUL AUSTIN CAN'T TECHNICALLY SEPARATE his work from his personal life because his most valuable set of tools is with him constantly. So, when he steps off the plane from New York to visit family and friends in Adelaide, it is his finely-tuned olfactory system that first welcomes him home. "There is something very specific about the scent of cut grass and how it mixes with the eucalyptus trees in Adelaide," says Paul. "It's one of my favourite combinations. I also love the briny quality to the sea here."

Having spent more than 20 years at the heart of the scent world in Paris and New York, Paul has been well trained in the art of fragrance aesthetics, being able to distinguish and use a large range of ingredients and their smells to convey different moods and ultimately compose a product that captures the brand or the zeitgeist. It is an abstract and glamorous craft.

When Paul finished school at Rostrevor College, he studied business at UniSA and then signed up for a foreign placement with AIESEC, an organisation which offers graduates internships in other countries. A position with Unilever in London led to an opening at one of the company's fragrance creation divisions, Quest International, in Paris. "Initially I wasn't interested in fragrance, but the allure of Paris was irresistible," says Paul. "It was a magical time, living in the Marais, immersing myself in French culture and learning about one of France's most esteemed *metiers*."

Paul became the protege of Yves de Chiris, the seventh generation perfumer from France's famous fragrance region, Grasse, who is said to be a direct descendent of one of the characters in Suskind's novel. He worked alongside de Chiris for three years, learning about more than just the world of perfume. "Yves sat me down on my first day and instructed me that any proper education in perfumery requires an equal immersion in French language, food, wine and art. I was a more than willing student."

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Early in his time in Paris, Paul was fortunate enough to assist in the development of several of the perfume industry's most influential fragrances, including *Angel* by Thierry Mugler, "perhaps the most controversial and important scent launched in the past 30 years". Known for its distinctive and utterly unique "fairy floss" note, Paul says, it went from being reviled to creating an entirely new olfactory family, which he describes as "gustative" or edible. "A barrage of scents riffing off the edible theme have since followed suit."

Over his 18 year career at Quest, where he ended up as the global vice president for the company's Fine Fragrance division, Paul has worked on "literally hundreds of fragrance projects". Some of his favourite projects include *J'adore* by Dior, the *Palais Royal* range by Serge Lutens, *Black Cashmere* by Donna Karan, *Narciso* by Narciso Rodriguez, *Le Male* by Jean Paul Gaultier and *Neroli Portofino* by Tom Ford.

Most fragrances launched today are created by a handful of large fragrance companies such as Quest (now called Givaudan,





Left: Paul Austin on location in India: in a village outside Jaipur (top) while filming the local craftspeople weaving carpets featured in his *ABC Carpet & Home* film; and with a jasmine garland seller near Madurai (bottom) during the filming of the native jasmine sambac harvest. "Jasmine sambac is a signature ingredient in J'adore by Dior." **Opening page:** Paul Austin at home in New York. Photograph Benjamin Petit.

HEAVEN SCENT

Beyond the sea and a freshly mowed lawn in Adelaide, Paul's favourite smells are Indian jasmine and sandalwood. But when it comes to bottled fragrances these are his top 10.

MENS

Tom Ford, Neroli Portofino
Atelier Cologne, Mistral Patchouli
Chanel, Coromandel
Commes des Garçons, Wonderwood
Thirdman, Eau Monumentale

WOMENS

Serge Lutens, Ambre Sultan
Estee Lauder, Private Collection Tuberose
Gardenia
Narciso, Narciso Rodriguez
Francis Kurkdjian, Aqua Universalis
Byredo, Black Saffron

the largest fragrance and flavour company in the world). Akin to how a creative director might work at an advertising agency, perfumers at fragrance companies are given a verbal or visual brief by the client which they translate into a series of olfactory sketches, which are refined over the course of the project.

In the mid '90s, Paul was asked to go to New York to open Quest's offices there. Reluctant to leave Paris, he agreed to go on one condition: that he would return to Paris in no longer than two years. Like a lot of people who move to New York, Paul found it irresistible. He's been living in the heart of Greenwich Village for almost 20 years now but still spends a few months every year in France.

A few years ago, Paul started his own company in a slightly different, but still related field, applying his sensitivities to a new calling. "I left the fragrance industry to take on a six month research project in India," he explains. "One element of my research involved the study of Ayurveda at a training hospital in Southern India. I soon discovered that many of the best natural perfumery ingredients were grown nearby. Even though I might be considered a 'fragrance expert' and could lecture about where and how these ingredients grew and the associated practices of extraction, I had never had my fingers in the earth. I had never been at the source."

Paul then followed 18 separate perfume ingredients all over India – jasmine, tuber rose, rose, sandalwood and different spices – documenting and observing the various processes and the links these ingredients have to the local communities. "I realised the natural ingredient was completely absent from the promise of how fragrances are communicated today," Paul explains. "The idea for my company crystallised immediately: to connect my industry to the truth and beauty found at its source."

His company, Austin Advisory Group, is now focused on what Paul calls "source stories". Paul and his team work with

heritage brands across several luxury goods sectors, including scent, beauty, jewellery, fashion and luxury homewares. One of his first clients, Robertet, the centuries old fragrance and flavour company from Grasse, commissioned Paul to produce several films relating to natural ingredients used in perfumery. One film showcases the world's largest rose harvest in Turkey, where each June and July Robertet harvest and process hundreds of tons of damask rose for use in their perfumes. Another film took Paul and his team to capture the careful hand picking of ylang ylang in Madagascar. Yet another had him working with Rolls Royce on a journey to the flower fields of the south of France. "My company's work today focuses on using authentic storytelling to connect a brand's narrative to its source – whether it is an ingredient, a specific place, or a point in its history," explains Paul. "Great luxury brands today understand that their customers want to know much more about the craft, characters and provenance behind the products they love. We bring these authentic stories to life."

Paul has recently created source stories for a number of companies outside of the scent world. One of his favourites is for India's esteemed Gem Palace, "the storied jewellers to the Moghul emperors of Jaipur in India, journeying to a veritable Alibaba's cave". Here Paul captured first hand the generations of skills and traditions in the Gem Palace workshops, observing and interviewing some of the world's best gem cutters, polishers and setters. "The specific jewellery crafts of Jaipur risk being lost," he says. "Thankfully, the Kasliwal family, the founders of the Gem Palace, are committed to training the next generation of craftsmen." Incidentally, this film is featured in a major exhibition about Indian jewellery at the Kremlin Museum in Moscow until the end of July.

Another project took Paul to the source of New York retailer, ABC Carpet & Home's "one-of-a-kind and pricey hand-knotted silk rugs". And a series of short films made with designer Donna Karan about her fragrance Cashmere Mist, "one of the best-selling American perfumes of all time", will launch digitally in August. Like perfumes, Paul's source stories are beautiful works, designed to trigger an emotional response, a resonance, and a connection that transcends the commercial.

Being of South Australian origin, his dream, he says, is to do a source story project with one of the great wine producers here, linking the craft, skills and terroir unique to South Australia.

"It all starts to make sense when I come back to Adelaide," adds Paul. "When I was 16 I went on an AFS scholarship (intercultural student exchange program) spending four months in Sorrento, Italy. For the first couple of days I was lost in the unfamiliar smells and sounds, the *depaysement*. That's what set it off – I was always super curious. I guess I'm a kind of frustrated anthropologist."

Paul's films on the jasmine harvest, *Majestic Flora*, and India's handcrafted jewellery, *Gem Palace*, can be viewed at sourcestories.com