

Fresh pickings

A boutique *ROSE* grower in Grasse still harvests precious blooms for Dior using *TRADITIONAL methods* to create exceptionally potent perfumes.

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Hand-picking blooms at Domaine de Manon in Grasse, France.

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Carole
Biancalana

As the sun starts its pilgrimage across the boundless sky, thousands of rosebuds crack open, exposing their pink silken tissue-paper petals to the air. The rich, sweet scent is an assault to the senses, like diving into a bottle of perfume and swimming around in its nectar. I've just arrived at Domaine de Manon, exclusive rose supplier to Christian Dior Parfums, in Grasse in the south of France, to meet Carole Biancalana, a third-generation rose grower and to see how they harvest the rose oil that will feature in Dior's new Les Extraits collection.

The setting is suitably stunning: a quaint brick farmhouse, a tractor standing by just so, and there, stretching into the distance, a field of pink rose bushes blooming ripe from the rich *terroir*. It's lush and leafy, like a floral-printed carpet that fills the air with its sweet rosy headiness. Biancalana greets me and we walk. She is sun-kissed and sandy-haired with a smattering of youthful freckles. Dew clings to the grass and the soil crumbles beneath our feet. It's early – 8am – Biancalana wanted me to be here when the picking would normally start, so I can smell the flowers at their most potent.

"It's very important to pick early in the morning and deliver to the perfume factory by 12 o'clock to keep optimum perfume in the flowers. If you left the flowers on the plants they would lose their fragrance," she explains, demonstrating the correct way to pick a rose, carefully separating it from the stem. "You must only take the bud, no leaves," her brown fingers expertly plucking the flower off the bush to pass it to me.

These candy-pink blooms with their fresh, sugared scent are known as *Rosa centifolia*, or rose de Mai, and they only bloom in the month of May. Biancalana hires only female pickers ("they are more delicate"), who use their fingers – no shears, no secateurs – to harvest the buds between 8am and 11am when the sun has slightly opened them but they haven't released the full potency of their scent. They are harvested into linen-lined jute bags and are driven to Robertet, the factory nearby

where they undergo a solvent extraction to make a "concrete" or wax. The wax is then treated through an alcohol distillation to make the "absolute", the highly potent perfume oil that becomes a key ingredient in many Dior fragrances. Rose de Mai absolute is one of the world's most precious raw materials: it takes 300,000 roses to create just one kilogram of absolute.

Dior's perfume creator François Demachy created the Les Extraits collection, five of the house's heritage scents for true perfume aficionados. Housed in precious bottles, these concentrated versions of the original fragrances each contain rose de Mai absolute, which adds a sweet freshness to an already expertly crafted scent.

"An extrait is the ultimate expression of perfumery. It is the purest variation of a fragrance," Demachy explains to me later. He chose Domaine de Manon to be the supplier as he loved Biancalana's commitment to the land and her precise production methods.

"I loved her personality and attachment to flowers," says Demachy. It rings true as Biancalana explains her *métier*.

"It's not a job, it's a way of life. It's patience," she says, adding that the farm is completely organic: she picks insects off the plants with her fingers and pulls weeds out by hand. The hand-harvesting of these precious flowers is an expensive way to operate, but Dior believes it gives the perfume oil the most sublime and luxurious fragrance.

"We prefer quality over quantity. François wants quality, organic flowers and exceptional perfume," she says firmly.

Meeting Biancalana is a precious insight into the heartland of perfumery, an art that still respects and treasures traditional methods. It's a rarity in this fast world, and something that needs to be seen to be believed. It's reassuring to see the fragrance industry still has its roots in the ground, while its philosophies lie firmly in the heavens. It's a point Christian Dior himself knew well when he said: "A perfume is an open door to a closed world."

The roses are collected in linen-lined jute bags.

THESE PINK
BLOOMS WITH
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HEART OF GRASSE



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