



FRAGRANCE SPECIAL

FRUIT OF THE FOREST

Perfumer Christine Nagel went down to the woods today to pursue the essence of floral fantasy for a new fragrance.

Words: Sigourney Cantelo

In an English woodland, in the fresh green hours of morning, sunlight sluices through the trees in misty shards, lighting up the forest floor, illuminating a carpet of bright blue flowers like a petal shag-pile rug. A slim, striking woman walks into the ankle-deep foliage, drops to her knees and, thrusting her nose among the quivering plants, inhales deeply. She stays there until the knees of her jeans are soaked through

with dew and her mind is racing with formulas and raw materials. Being a perfumer, she must remember this smell exactly, because, unlike with jasmine or rose, there is no way to extract the scent from a bluebell. It must be recreated in a lab. And this time, she plans to recreate it with a twist.

Our intrepid nose is Christine Nagel, master perfumer for English fragrance house Jo Malone. When the brand asked her to

create a new scent around the bluebell, she had to take a field trip to a woodland in Sussex because she had never smelt the little bell-shaped flowers before: they are endangered in Britain, and nearly extinct in most of Europe and the US.

"I went to smell the bluebells, but because they don't exist in raw materials for perfume – it's the same with lilac, lily of the valley and frangipani – I had two possibilities. I could use a scientific method like headspace [a technology that captures the smell of something that can't be extracted] or (and I preferred this since this project for me is more poetic) I work with my nose and with my mind, and I smell, smell, smell," Nagel says, sniffing an imaginary bluebell, her bright brown eyes lighting up at the memory.

We are at the launch of the Jo Malone Wild Bluebell fragrance in London, 18 months after Nagel's journey into the woods. The finished perfume has been decanted into the company's trademark classic glass cologne bottles, which are spread out on the table before us. Nagel sprays the fragrance



Jo Malone Wild Bluebell cologne, 100ml for \$170, and scented candle, \$105.

on to a scent blotter and passes it to me. "Each olfactory impression that I have, I write down: 'It's soft; it's green; it's dewy.' It's a dichotomy, there are two sensations: it's fresh and it's also suave, enveloping. I go to Paris and in my lab I recreate with my imagination."

And what a beautiful imagination that is. Jo Malone Wild Bluebell is a feather-light floral that, paradoxically, is as fresh as it is warm. It captures the enigma of bluebells as they change throughout the day, from the dewy crispness of morning to a sweet redolence when they have been warmed by the sun. "I built my fragrance with



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VOGUE BEAUTY

different sensations,” Nagel explains. “For the top note it’s bluebell with a trace of cloves for the spiciness, but it’s delicate. For the heart I work with the persimmon fruit, but I don’t use the fruity part; I use the skin, which is slightly bitter. This brings balance, because then it’s not too sweet. And I use lily of the valley and jasmine.”

The story behind the fragrance is enchanting and whimsical. Bluebell is personified by a character, a wild-spirited girl from a grand English family who traipses the world with a white rabbit and a suitcase of vintage pieces from the Place des Victoires. When she returns home to her family’s 26-room pile in the country, she finds it overgrown with wild bluebells.

This eccentric tale and the campaign (shot by famed fashion photographer and British *Vogue* favourite Tim Walker, no less) herald a dynamic new direction for the brand, masterminded by group creative director James Gager, who has been brought across from M.A.C (both brands are owned by parent company Estée Lauder) to add his unique aesthetic and conceptual stamp to upcoming launches.

As we chat, the story is brought to life around us. We are in a Georgian townhouse in London’s Fitzroy Square, which has been transformed into a country manor. Bluebells grow out of crevices in walls and stairs and (faux) white bunnies crouch timidly behind them. Dutch model Iekeliene Stange, who plays Bluebell in the campaign, is cavorting around dressed in a vintage ballgown, while handsome uniformed waiters serve lunch from a menu that includes poached salmon with cucumber and Brancaster lobster salad with bisque dressing. The event is pretty, polite and terribly English, yet full of whimsy and warmth. It perfectly encapsulates the new mood of Jo Malone.

The brand originated in 1994 when facialist Jo Malone was asked to make 100 little bottles of her nutmeg and ginger bath oil, which she used to give as thanks to her well-heeled London clients, for a dinner party. The orders rolled in and Malone opened a store. She sold the company to Estée Lauder in 1999, staying on as chair and creative director before bowing out fully in 2006 (she still pops in to the Sloane Street

store to say hello). But this was not to the detriment of the brand, which continued to flourish. It recently opened in Belgium, its 25th country. The choice to bring Gager on board was not only about reinvigorating the brand and enticing new customers, but also

participating. Jo Malone has tied its display to the launch of the limited-edition pretty pink Cherry Blossom fragrance with an outstanding window display. A huge cherry tree appears to be growing out of the store, through the glass and into the street. Hundreds of rose petals adorn the windows and the largest pink peonies I’ve ever seen welcome you as you step inside. The fragrant

cream and black store smells of the brand’s signature scent Lime Basil & Mandarin and the newer, very popular English Pear & Freesia (one of Nagel’s masterpieces). The excitement is palpable as customers are offered glasses of champagne or pink lemonade, pink marshmallows and hand massages. There’s a warmth and openness to it that is rarely seen in such a luxury retail environment.

“We really grew [the company] through service,”

Souvenirs from the Wild Bluebell campaign launch, including images of the whimsical character Bluebell.



“You know the whole fairytale thing...that lovely tradition of English fantasy”

explains Debbie Wild, the brand’s fragrance and lifestyle director. “We put Jo’s culture in and embedded it in every single member who joined our company. We made sure that whoever walked in through those doors walked out feeling: ‘Wow, I’ve never been served like that before,’” she says.

While I’m browsing the store a few minutes after our interview, a woman comes stumbling in off the street. She’s fallen, running for the bus, and both her hands are grazed and bleeding. She is clearly shaken. Immediately two staff members sweep her into a seat and begin cleaning and bandaging her hands. Wild offers the woman some champagne and talks quietly, soothingly to her. She is farewelled a few minutes later, smiling, the dent in her day smoothed by a little retail oasis. Crisis averted, the customers turn back to their shopping and watch with glee as their gifts are wrapped in delicate layers of black tissue and tied with the trademark black grosgrain ribbon. As they wander out they stop and gaze in wonder at the gargantuan cherry tree. I can’t wait to see what they do with Wild Bluebell. ■