



Artwork by Bill Meyer

The Alchemy of Love

WRITTEN BY

Harriet Quick

“I smell you on my skin” the text projection created by Jenny Holzer in Florence (1996) on the banks of the sometimes pungent River Arno is one beautiful tribute to scent. When we perfume ourselves in rituals only known to us and fall into that seductive olfactory aura that triggers memories, emotions and carnal desire, little do we know of the intricate process that happens between harvesting, spritzing and the alchemy of love that happens on the skin and between humankind.

While we increasingly equip ourselves with the smarts concerning farm-to-table organic agriculture — Pisanello tomatoes, sapphire and white truffles included — the horticultural practices surrounding flowers remain mysterious, mystical even. Yet scent is a vital ingredient in life — it helps us live more intensely, fall in love and make love more passionately. Many babies are conceived under a fragrant cloud and the natural milky lactones of breast milk help fuse that first bond.

Deep within the fields of Grasse, on the 30-hectare Mul family estate on the Côte d’Azur, lies an extraction plant and laboratory of Willy Wonka complexity. Here *Jasminum grandiflorum*, May rose, *iris pallida*, tuberose and geranium rosat are harvested from the fertile fields that are sheltered from the wind and transformed via a unique extraction and distillation process into the highest-quality flower essences, the precious ingredients of CHANEL perfumes.

The production processes developed by the Mul family estate, headed up by Fabrice Bianchi (the son-in-law of Joseph Mul, the great-grandson of the original owner), fuse modern-day technology with horticultural practices initiated by the Mul family in the 19th century. It was 400 years ago that essences began to be used to perfume leather goods that were crafted in Grasse’s tanneries. Boots, saddles, bridles and riding capes were treated to a scented waxing to rid the leathers of their malodorous stable and tanning smells and

deliver the rider in fine form, ready to swash-buckle, ravish and leave a sensorial molecular trail behind. Floral scents of the time were made from flower oils or waters distilled from blooms such as roses, orange flowers and jasmine that were grown with great success in Grasse, earning the region its moniker, “the cradle of perfumery.” It was the start of an industry that has grown exponentially, in parallel with increasing prosperity and the culture and commerce surrounding style and seduction. The two became inextricably linked with Parisian couturiers at the forefront of innovation, and in the case of CHANEL, breakthrough synthetic and organic formulas that gave scents nuanced layers, modernity and longevity.

When Ernest Beaux and Gabrielle Chanel created the house’s first perfume — CHANEL N°5 — in 1921, they used jasmine from Grasse. In 1987 CHANEL entered into an exclusive agreement with the Mul family, who were then, and still are today, the largest producers in the region, to ensure that the house always has the best-quality jasmine and sufficient quantities for the production of Extrait N°5. The collaboration

flourished, as did sales of CHANEL perfumes and, in time, the Mul estate has come to cultivate rose, iris, geranium and tuberose for the house. It all begins with the quality of the soil (protected by crop rotation) and a rhizome, or plant stem. At the Mul estate the cultivation of the fragile, night-blooming jasmine blossom (the flower of the stars) is a science in itself. Harvesting happens between August and October, in the early mornings, with gatherers nimbly picking flowers and placing them in wicker baskets covered with damp cloths. The quantity required is mind-boggling: 1kg of jasmine equals 10,000 flowers, with each gatherer picking about 350g per hour; these are then placed in baskets and taken to the factory (built in 1988) for immediate extraction. Soaked in solvent, the fragrance is absorbed into the liquid, which then evaporates, leaving the scent in a wax known as a concrete.

5 tons of fresh iris
rhizomes = 1kg of
iris butter

The insoluble wax is then separated from the fragrant substance to obtain the absolute — a highly concentrated liquid. Next, the precious aromatic liquid is sent to the CHANEL Fragrance Creation and Development Laboratory for quality testing. It is a science reliant on many factors. The quality of the concrete relies on weather conditions and the time of day the plants are harvested. Says Jean-François Vieille, who manages the extraction plant.

Each floral species requires a unique process. *Iris pallida*, with its slender mauve blossoms, hides its scent in the roots that are grown underground for three years. More than 1.5 hectares are devoted to this botanical treasure, which is harvested in October and sliced and dried for future distillation, with a percentage of rhizomes saved for replanting. The slices take three years to fully dry before the soft, powdery odour is extracted by distillation to become iris essential oil, known as orris butter. In the spring a livelier iris changes on the burnish — dove / In the spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love, wrote Alfred, Lord Tennyson, in his poem *Locksley Hall*, of frisky temptations triggered by voluptuous, and often phallic, flora.

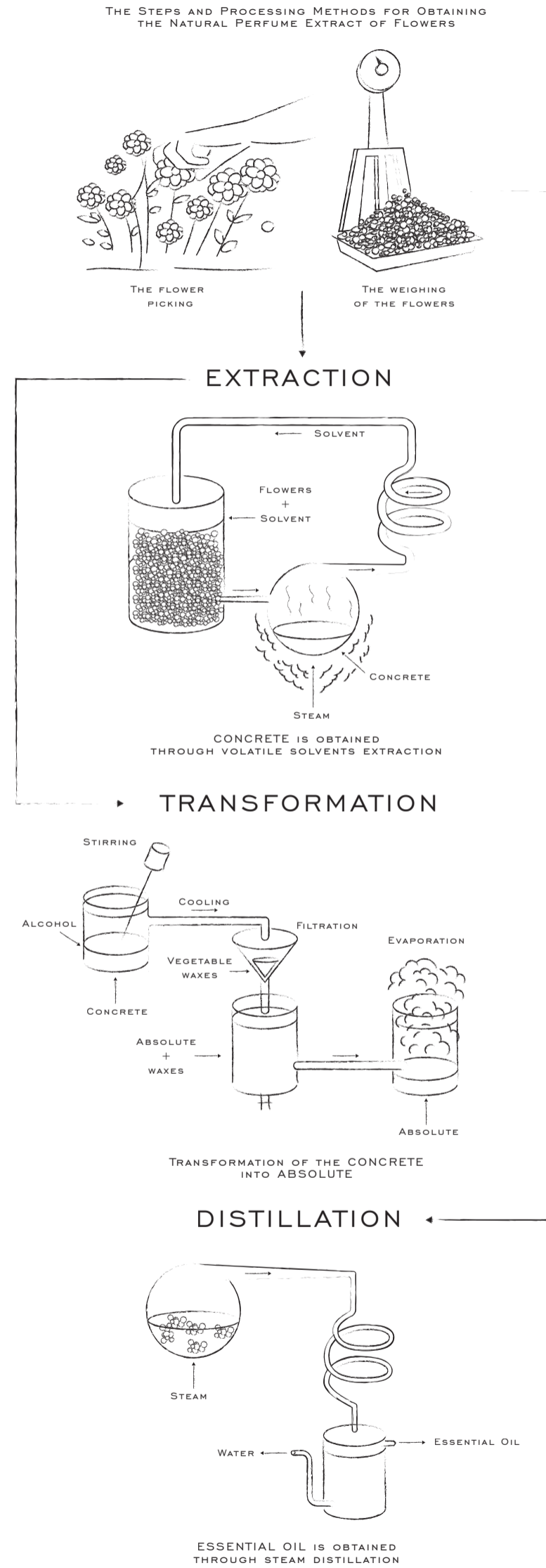
The tuberose, a delicate, star-shaped flower and profoundly fragrant, gives off its voluptuous honeyed scent at night and blooms from August to November. Up to 2,000 flowers are harvested per hectare and the fragile flowers are treated with the softest touch. So erotic is the scent that, during the Renaissance, young women were forbidden from walking through fields of tuberose. Yet unless handled with utmost skill the scent can induce nausea not ecstasy.

Meanwhile, geranium rosat, with its subtle peppery, rose and lemon scent, is harvested using a custom-designed mowing blade before September 15, when the autumn rains typically arrive. The delightful, sweet rose of May is the most expensive and precious to cultivate. Gatherers work for three intense weeks during that month, placing fresh blossoms into burlap bags and picking 5kg per hour, representing 2,000 flowers. As many as 50,000 rose bushes stretch out across the horizon, their calyxes opening at sunrise, filling the air with scent.

There are always flowers for those who want to see them, wrote Henri Matisse. At Mul the flowers are not only seen, they are also nurtured, touched and allowed to flourish in increasingly temperamental, unpredictable climatic conditions. Some plants even receive music therapy with a certain sound level frequency that is reputed to kill off harmful bacteria. Our flowers are like children whom we raise into adulthood, says Bianchi, who with CHANEL works to protect the land from overproduction and ensure cultivation for decades to come. The day that the picking of the flower disappears from the chain that links flower to fragrance is the day fragrance loses all of its poetic and magical power, notes Olivier Polge, CHANEL's in-house Perfumer Creator.

As we liberally spritz our treasured scents on necks and wrists (and wherever the skin is warm) and indulge in olfactory escape, think of those rhizomes and flowers in Grasse. The ultimate alchemy is us — each scent will mingle differently, according to our unique skin type, pH, age, hormones and environment. The emotions, associations, metaphors and memories are part of our own personal, secret autobiography. And that makes the love made with scent that much more intense.

Chanel: The Art of Creating Fragrance: Flowers of the French Riviera by Lionel Paillès, photographer Pierre Even (Abrams Books)



Paperartworks and photography by Kyle Bean



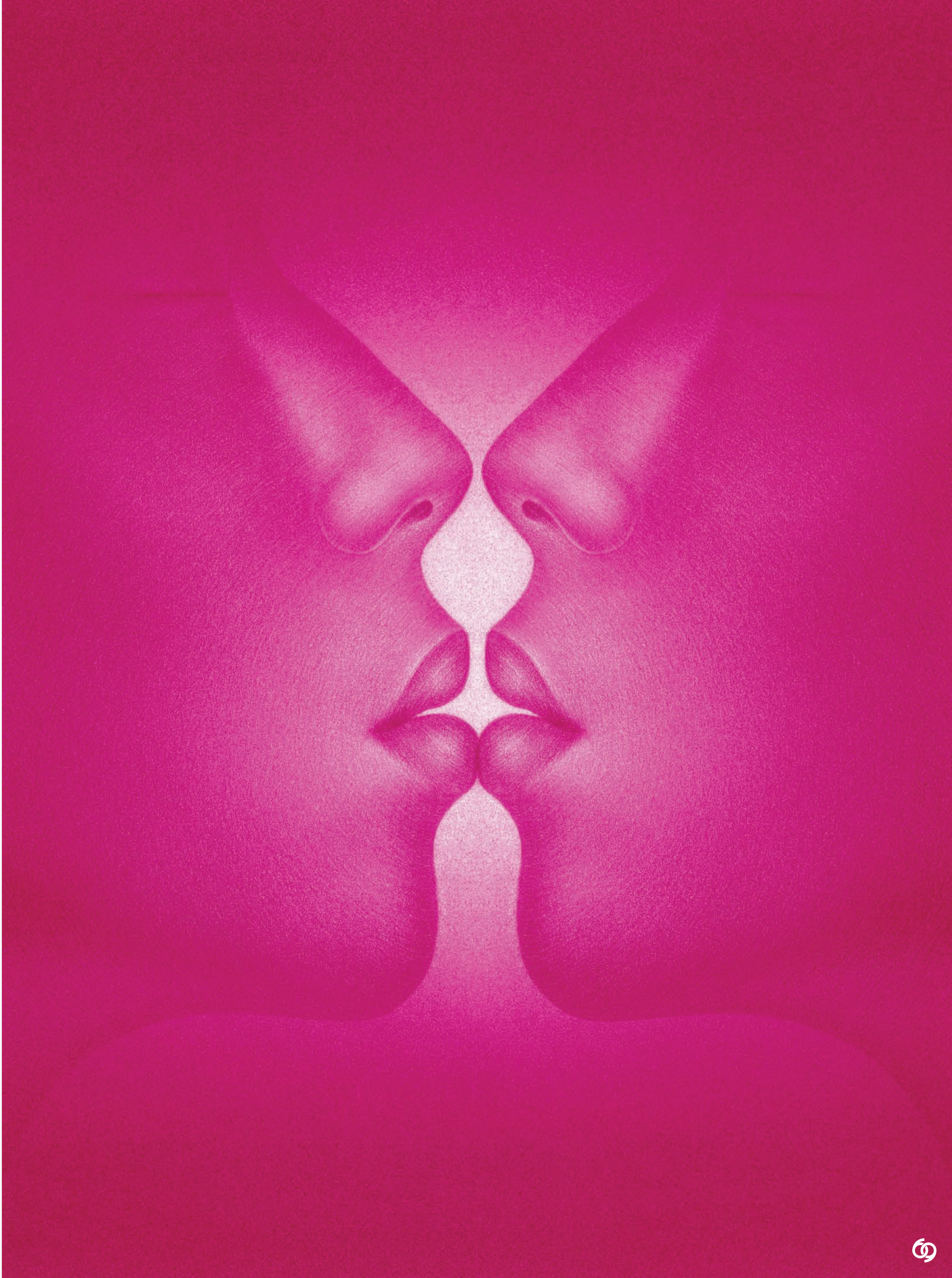
FIVE FLOWERS AND PLANTS HARVESTED FROM 30 HECTARES IN PÉGOMAS, SOUTHEASTERN FRANCE, FOR CHANEL

N1 Jasmine Botanical name: *Jasminum grandiflorum* Perfume: N15 Origin: Egypt Height: 1-1.5 metres Extraction: from the flowers Harvest: August/October, 350kg jasmine = 550g absolute *N2 May Rose* Botanical name: *Rosa centifolia* Perfumes: N15 and other CHANEL perfume extracts Origin: France Height: 1.5 metres Extraction: from the flowers Harvest: three weeks in May, 400kg roses = 600g absolute *N3 Tuberose* Botanical name: *Pollanthes tuberosa simple* Perfume: Gabrielle Origin: Mexico Height: 0.5-1 metre Extraction: from the flowers Harvest: August/October, 1 ton = 0.5kg extract *N4 Geranium Rosat* Botanical name: *Pelargonium graveolens* Perfume: Coco Noir Origin: South Africa Height: 0.5-0.8 metre Distillation: from the stems and leaves Harvest: September, 1 ton fresh geranium = 1kg essential oil *N5 Iris Pallida* Botanical name: *Iris pallida* Perfumes: N19, La Pausa, Misia Origin: Italy Height: 1 metre Distillation: from the rhizomes (roots of the roots) Harvest: October, three years of drying, 5 tons fresh rhizomes = 1kg Iris butter (essential oil of iris)



Paper artworks and photography by Kyle Bean

Artwork by Aiste Stancikaite





Perfume: *Coco Noir*
Created: 2012

A. *Bergamot*
Common name: bergamot orange
Species: *C bergamia*
Genus: *Citrus*

B. *Rose Geranium Leaf*
Common name: rose geranium leaf
Species: *P graveolens*
Genus: *Pelargonium*



Nose: *Jacques Polge*
Artwork by: *Ana Mimosashvili*

C. *Rose*
Common name: Rose
Genus: *Rosa*

D. *Patchouli*
Common name: patchouli
Species: *P cablin*
Genus: *Pogostemon*

