

The New York Times® Reprints

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytreprints.com for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

Enough Said
Now Playing

January 14, 2011

Following the Scent

By JESSICA KERWIN JENKINS

THE SECRET OF CHANEL NO. 5

The Intimate History of the World's Most Famous Perfume

By Tilar J. Mazzeo

Illustrated. 281 pp.
Harper/HarperCollins
Publishers. \$25.99.

Each 30-milliliter bottle of Chanel No. 5 is packed with the essence of a thousand jasmine flowers, the fragrance of a dozen May roses from Grasse and a heaping dose of aldehydes, the molecules that early on gave the scent its modern edge. But as Tilar J. Mazzeo points out in “The Secret of Chanel No. 5,” these are only a few of the many ingredients that turned a perfume into a 20th-century obsession. Into the brew went Coco Chanel’s warm memories of tallow soap and her anguish over lost love, as well as the perfumer Ernest Beaux’s nostalgia for imperial Russia and the Arctic breezes of the White Sea. The result: alchemical magic and unprecedented sales that have led industry insiders to refer to No. 5 as *le monstre* — the monster.

No. 5, now priced at about \$260 an ounce, has been an item of fashion and fetish since its debut in 1921, when in a bit of stealth marketing Chanel invited her friends to dinner in Cannes and spritzed the perfume into the atmosphere around them. “All the women who passed by our table stopped and sniffed the air,” Chanel reported. “We pretended we didn’t notice.”

Mazzeo calls her book an “unauthorized biography of a scent,” but in fact it is a biography of Coco Chanel as seen through the prism of her famous square flacon. Mazzeo’s 2008 book [“The Widow Clicquot”](#) concentrated on another French luxury liquid, Veuve Clicquot, and its maker. Here she explores interconnections between designer and perfume, teasing out the relationship with delicacy.

Chanel’s story has itself become a commodity: young Gabrielle, becomes Coco of the cabarets, a mistress to wealthy men and, s



MORE IN
ARTICLES

Shine
Read Mo

the intrepid hatmaker who conquers the fashion world. (If Mazzeo's book has a fault, it is a failure to digress more richly into Chanel's role in fashion.) At Aubazine, the convent-orphanage where Chanel spent her childhood (she was left there by her father after her mother died of tuberculosis), she was immersed in an austerity that would guide her aesthetic, and absorbed the scents of fresh linens and soapy children that would seep into No. 5. Later, while living among the louche demimondaines, she admired the grand courtesan Émilienne d'Alençon, who, unlike her peers, smelled like a lady, which is to say scrubbed. Chanel's signature perfume "had to be lush and opulent and sexy," Mazzeo writes, "but it also had to smell clean."

Perfume aficionados suspect that it was Chanel's lover Dmitri Pavlovich — a cousin to Czar Nicholas II living in exile in France after conspiring to assassinate Rasputin — who introduced her to the perfumer Beaux in 1920. Beaux's Rallet No. 1 was a Romanov family favorite, and for Chanel he created a revamped version. The fifth sample, No. 5, was the one she had waited for: "a perfume like nothing else," she said, "a woman's perfume, with the scent of a woman."

No. 5 succeeded despite a bumbling marketing plan, tough competition and a protracted legal battle between Chanel and the brothers Pierre and Paul Wertheimer, the industrialists who handled manufacturing and distribution of No. 5 and to whom she sold a majority of her perfume business in 1924. It was a decision she would regret.

When Germany invaded France in 1940, the Wertheimers, who were Jewish, fled to New York, where Estée Lauder helped set them up; a daring employee returned to occupied France and smuggled out enough jasmine and rose extracts to produce No. 5 in large quantities. As for Chanel, her wartime activities included an attempt to claim the Wertheimers' French business as "abandoned," a request the Vichy government denied.

Still, Chanel wouldn't let No. 5 go. From Switzerland, she publicly declaimed its poor quality and created a competing line under the name Mademoiselle Chanel. "It is monstrous," she said of the Wertheimers' No. 5. "They produced it in Hoboken!" Rather than take her to court, Pierre Wertheimer eventually brokered a settlement persuading Chanel to sign over all rights to her business, and her name, in exchange for a hefty

annual income and the promise that he'd pay for anything she wanted — forever. By Mazzeo's lights, Chanel, late in her life, resumed living as a kept woman.

By then, though, No. 5 was beyond taint from politics or scandalous association. At American military commissaries, G.I.'s had snapped up the Wertheimers' No. 5, while in Paris, German soldiers had lined up in front of Chanel's shop for the French version. The perfume represented prewar decadence, glamour and good times in a bottle.

"I couldn't bring back an awful lot," one wartime nurse wrote home to America. But no matter. She landed the era's ultimate souvenir: "Chanel, you know, the perfume."

Jessica Kerwin Jenkins is the author of "Encyclopedia of the Exquisite: An Anecdotal History of Elegant Delights." She writes for Vogue.