

by Sarah Colton



# NOTES FROM PARIS

## L'Osmothèque—Preserving The Past To Ensure The Future



# OSMOTHEQUE

Le Conservatoire international des Parfums

L'Osmothèque (In Greek "Osme" means "scent" and "theke" means "storage space")

*Where would intelligence be without memory?  
Where would creation be without the past?  
How could one create new perfumes without understanding the old?*

**Patricia de Nicolai**, President of L'Osmothèque  
From her preface to L'Osmothèque's latest book, *Once Upon A Time...Perfume*, authored by **Annick Le Guéner**.

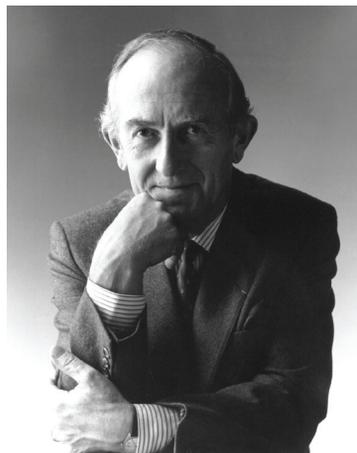
L'Osmothèque, arguably THE institution which best represents the living soul of perfume today, is remarkably similar in spirit to the mythical perfumes it was created to preserve. Referred to by some as 'the temple of French Perfumery' and by others as 'L'Académie of French perfume,' L'Osmothèque's formula was conceived out of passion, nurtured to life by a gifted artist and emanates a compelling *silage* which has proven to be both complex and tenacious. Today, under the careful tutelage of Patricia de Nicolai, President since 2008, L'Osmothèque is emerging from an appropriately sheltered past to assume a wider role on the world scene.



L'Osmothèque's Patricia de Nicolai in the perfume lab of her company NICOLAÏ Createur de Parfums

What is this L'Osmothèque? What is its purpose? Where is it going? To answer these questions, *Beauty Fashion* ventured to L'Osmothèque's sanctuary on the Institut Supérieur International du Parfum, de la Cosmétique et de l'Aromatique Alimentaire (ISIPCA) campus in Versailles and found that the answers lie, not surprisingly, in a story—a passionate love story that began with a man...and perfume.

**Jean Kerléo**, Founder of L'Osmothèque, is a Master Perfumer and *doyen* of living French noses. Having begun his career working for Helena Rubinstein, he later moved to Jean Patou where he became the preeminent Perfumer for the brand between the late 60s and late 90s. A man of great talent and genius, he is best known as the creator of 1000 (1972) as well as other



Jean Kerléo, Master Perfumer and Founder of L'Osmothèque



The ISIPCA campus in Versailles where L'Osmothèque is housed.



Historic perfume bottles on display at L'Osmothèque.

signature fragrances for the brand.

Through his experience at Jean Patou, Mr. Kerléo became interested in fragrance reconstruction—duplicating an extinct perfume, working only with the exact original

formula. Ironically, this activity (which would later become the passion of a lifetime) was originally motivated by frustration and annoyance. "When I created a perfume, people would sometimes say to me, 'Well of course I like your perfume. It smells good, but you know, twenty years ago, perfumes smelled better.' Of course, I knew that in general people tend to remember things better than they were, but it was annoying because the perfumes they were referring to no longer existed, so there was no way to make a true comparison. It was this impediment to establishing truth that sent me in search of lost perfumes, beginning initially with Jean Patou and later taking on reconstructions for other famous perfume houses such as Houbigant and Coty."

Because of Mr. Kerléo's extraordinary talent, **Jean de Mouy**, then President of Jean Patou, asked him to do what at the time was considered an impossible task—to reconstruct twelve of the oldest and most famous Jean Patou fragrances (at the behest of top clients who were heartbroken that some of their beloved fragrances were no longer available). Armed only with the formulae, Mr. Kerléo triumphed in this "quest for the Holy Grail," and the result was the launch of Jean Patou's Ma Collection. Following the success of this accomplishment, he was soon commissioned by other fragrance companies to do the same.

Well beyond the obvious commercial value of these exploits, Mr. Kerléo recognized these 'revived' fragrances as historical treasures. He knew that an understanding of the past was a crucial element for creating the future, and that safeguarding these masterpieces was important for posterity. The seed of the L'Osmothèque dream was born.

Starting with Jean Patou, the first fragrance house to entrust him with reconstructed fragrances and their formulae, Mr. Kerléo later convinced other well-known houses to do the same, and ultimately a host of perfume houses and individuals came forward on their own volition to share their formulae.

Perhaps, more importantly than his extraordinary gifts as a Perfumer, Mr. Kerléo's passionate love for perfume carried his dream to levels well above those of the ego of a talented individual, and his life energy was transformed to that of an enlightened guardian of perfumery. He is quick to emphasize the fact that perfume houses did not give him their formulae, but rather *entrusted* them to him for safekeeping, and that a relationship of trust is at the core of the L'Osmothèque ethos. "We are not the owners, but rather the *guardians* of a patrimony, and we take this role very seriously," he stated.

The original function and structure of L'Osmothèque as Mr. Kerléo conceived it was multi-fold: that of reconstructing and preserving fragrances in optimum conditions for posterity, creating a forum of notable Perfumers for the discussion of various aspects, methods and technical problems associated with such an undertaking and that of educating professionals and the general

public in the history of these perfumes through smelling seminars. An essential advantage of L'Osmothèque's conception was (and remains) that the products were to be neither owned nor sold, and therefore could contain critical ingredients no longer available or legal for commercial fragrances.

In spite of the genius of his project, it took Mr. Kerléo more than ten years to find supporters and a locale for L'Osmothèque. It was **Gérard Delcour** in 1988, who as Chairman of the Comité Français du Parfum (CFP) took the project to heart and brought the CFP in as a partner. In turn, Didier Simon, then Chairman of the Versailles Chamber of Commerce and Industry, became enchanted with the project and not only brought the Chamber of Commerce and Industry in as a partner but offered to house L'Osmothèque on the campus of ISIPCA. At the same time, the Société Française des Parfumeurs became a partner, as well. Recalling these early days, Mr. Delcour said, "I was convinced that Mr. Kerléo's L'Osmothèque was important because it offers the widest and clearest vision of our profession."

Other notable players during the early stages of the venture were Jean-François Blayn, **Raymond Chailan**, **Jean-Claude Ellena**, Yuri Gutsatz, **Jeannine Mongin**, **Raymond Pouliquen**, **Guy Robert**, Henri Sebag, **Yves Tanguy**, **Philippe Lepage** and **André Gerber**.

L'Osmothèque opened its doors for the first time on the ISIPCA campus in 1990, and currently houses more than 2,000 fragrances in its cave, sheltered from daylight in a neutral gas (argon) in an atmosphere at 12° Celsius. Here again, Mr. Kerléo succeeded where others doubted. As he recalls, "Early on there were many detractors who told me that in any event, perfume could not be conserved for any lengthy period of time. 'Your reconstructions are going to deteriorate within four or five years,' they would say. 'You'll just have to throw them away, and that will be the end of it.' But I can assure you that because of the methods we use in our cave, our perfumes do, indeed, endure and some of them are still in impeccable condition after more than twenty years."

The formulae date from as early as the 1<sup>st</sup> Century A.D with Le Parfum Royal and documents important moments in perfume history including legendary masterpieces from the beginnings of modern perfumery in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, all the way to the present era. As Mr. Kerléo explains, "Like everything else in the world, perfume trends evolve over the years. In earlier times, Perfumers were searching for beautiful harmonies like music, and perfumes were like classical music. Over time, there have been new developments which correspond to historic and fashion trends, for example, one similar to rock music which yielded perfumes like Dior's Poison. Some people love it; others hate it. But it's all part of the history and story of perfume, and our goal is to trace these lines and preserve them for better understanding and appreciation."

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WHO COMES TO L'OSMOTHÈQUE?



Givaudan's Shyamala Maisondieu, Sophie Cauchi and Martine Uzan (r.), Parisian Wine Broker Elisabeth Villeminot and Norwegian Perfume Journalist Gunnhid Bjornsti have lunch on the terrace of a local Versailles restaurant before a smelling seminar at L'Osmothèque.



Smelling seminar at L'Osmothèque



Ms. de Nicolai with Annick Le Guerer, Author of *Once Upon A Time... Perfume at the Louis Vuitton Cultural Space in Paris.*

Mr. Kerléo explained that “at first, the majority of visitors to L’Osmothèque were non-professionals, and it was amazing who came. Perfume is something that attracts people. Like fashion, hairdos and makeup, perfume embellishes our lives, and a fragrance can contribute to the creation of an idealized moment. People memorize it. Even though I knew this, I was constantly amazed by the number of people who made long journeys for the specific purpose of visiting L’Osmothèque, often to smell a single fragrance—the perfume worn by a mother, grandmother, husband or grandfather. They were looking for a lost perfume associated with a memory. On leaving

L’Osmothèque they were often quite introspective, as if they had gone to the source, touched what they had been yearning for, saw it was real and could leave in peace. It touched and thrilled me to witness first hand this one example of the extraordinary power of perfume.”

“Increasingly, our visitors are professionals, and in fact, one of our very first visitors more than fifteen years ago was the well-known Director of a major fashion house. He telephoned and said he wanted to come with a Perfumer whom I knew well; that he had seen candidates from several essential oil companies and had chosen one



Photo credit: Colton

Mr. Kerléo smells perfumes in his cave at L’Osmothèque

he wanted to work with. They were well advanced on the project, and they wanted to smell a selection of our most important *chypres*.”

“Today, industry professionals continue to come to us because L’Osmothèque is the only place in the world with such an extensive series of extinct perfumes from which the perfumes of our current era have evolved. Large companies send their Perfumers and other employees to our smelling seminars to study the originals. A company might be preparing a new launch and will send the entire marketing team along with one or two Perfumers. Or it might even be the Directors themselves, who come. We know them well. They come, four of five of them at a time, very discreetly with a client.”

L’OSMOTHÈQUE EXPANDS TO GRASSE

“In addition to the seminars offered in Versailles, we also have a small L’Osmothèque program at the Perfume Museum in Grasse, under the directorship of **Marie Christine Grasse**,” explained Mr. Kerléo. “One of our L’Osmothèques (Perfumers trained to give seminars), Yves Tanguy, educated a handful of Grasse museum employees to give smelling lectures and discovery programs using a small stock of recreated L’Osmothèque formulae. Although seemingly simple to carry out, this project was actually complicated because of the enormous confidentiality issues surrounding the formulae and our immense responsibilities as their custodians, and this tiny Grasse outgrowth is the result of much hard work on the part of many people.”

## TRANSITION

"In spite of many challenges, L'Osmothèque has thrived over the years, and clearly we have a treasure in our midst," Mr. Kerléo noted. "The question now is how best to adapt to the demands of changing times. Should we remain small and confidential, guardians, essentially, to a kind of shrine to perfume, known only to a chosen few? Even if this were our choice, survival in changing times involves adaptation, and sooner or later we must find another dimension. You've seen our cave. It's very *sympathique*, but it's not like we're going to take on the world with a few formulae and bottles of rare perfume. Yet, if we were to develop that to ten or twenty times the volume, the end product, for better or worse, would not resemble the original. Our mission has always been non-commercial, and this is a central part of our integrity and strength. It seems that whatever we do, we must remain extremely selective and vigilant in attesting to the highest level of quality."

"Two years ago in 2008 I handed over L'Osmothèque's reins to Patricia de Nicolai. She was my first and only choice for this position, and with a nod from **Alain Bothorel**, President of the CFP and the Chambre de Commerce, Ms. de Nicolai was approved as President. I know that, like myself, Patricia struggles with the conflicting priorities that accompany transition, and I'm confident that she will find a way to carry the L'Osmothèque vision into the future."

"To start with, she is a passionate and committed Perfumer. A graduate of ISIPCA, she has received many honors and awards including the prestigious Société Française des Parfumeurs (SFP) Young Perfumer's Award in 1989 for her fragrance Number One. Formerly of Quest, she founded her own luxury niche brand, NICOLAÏ Createur de Parfums in 1989 and has a number of boutiques in Paris, other parts of France, as well as international distribution. She is a seasoned expert and ambitious in this profession. Additionally, as a great granddaughter of Pierre Guerlain, perfume runs in her blood. She is absolutely reliable and extremely rigorous, both essential qualities for this position. There is a safe at L'Osmothèque in which we keep enormously valuable formulae which have been entrusted to our care, and we must take extreme precautions surrounding any manipulation of them. Even opening the safe is an involved procedure and must be done in the presence of several trustees who are members of the CFP and of L'Osmothèque."

## THE FUTURE OF L'OSMOTHÈQUE

Ms. de Nicolai stated, "Almost 30 years after its conception, it is extraordinary to take over this position and follow in the footsteps of Jean Kerléo, a man of such vision and drive, a truly *grand* Perfumer and *conservateur en chef* with a profound understanding of the history of perfume. I feel an enormous honor and responsibility

because of the unique character of L'Osmothèque, a treasure that is not to be squandered. We must carry it on with new vision, and I cannot do this alone."

"I am convinced that in order to meet the future, L'Osmothèque must continue its role as defender of the soul of the perfume industry. For me, that soul is the *métier* of the Perfumer, so often (inadvertently or otherwise) misunderstood and even denigrated. As Annick Le Guérer pointed out in the conclusion of *Once Upon A Time...Perfume*, the industry is increasingly composed of fragrances at two levels. There is mass-market perfumery, primarily a commercial affair, and there is artistic perfumery—highly creative, technical, beautiful and rare. Indubitably, L'Osmothèque is here to defend the interests of the latter."

"In order to carry out this mission, I am working closely with L'Osmothèque's partners, the CFP, Chambre de Commerce and the SFP. However, the demands and challenges of a new decade mean that L'Osmothèque's needs have increased, and I depend on and greatly appreciate the spontaneous participation of executives and directors of the brands and composition houses who in addition to contributing through the professional organizations, are extremely generous in offering direct financial support. As an example, *Once Upon A Time...Perfume* was primarily funded by individual donations from these brands and fragrance houses. It is fair and normal that these groups are increasingly taking advantage of our offerings (and accessing the vast collection of fragrances) at L'Osmothèque that they cannot otherwise provide in-house. In 2009 we did more than 124 seminars working with only four L'Osmothèques. As the reputation of L'Osmothèque grows, so will the number of these seminars as is already happening in 2010, and the structure of L'Osmothèque will have to adapt to accommodate this."

"As Jean has pointed out, we still have seminars that are open to the general public, but as companies realize the enormous commercial value to their business ventures, the percentage of professional seminars is increasing. Additionally, and of primary importance, we now have '*un numéro d'agrément*' which means that we are officially recognized as an '*institut de formation*' (teaching institute), and our seminars officially qualify as *formation continue* (continuing education). This means that companies can receive important tax deductions for participating."

"To give you an idea of what we have been doing recently two noteworthy examples come to mind:

### 1) A seminar focusing on a specific perfume group:

As part of preparations for the launch of Hermès Colognes Collection, constructed around Eau d'Orange Verte and the two new creations—Eau de Pamplemousse Rose and Eau de Gentiane Blanche—by Perfumer Jean-Claude Ellena—International Training Director **Rosanna Robino**, brought a group of Hermès Sales Representatives to L'Osmothèque for a smelling seminar. These are the

people who would later be introducing the products to retailers and key accounts, training the at-counter sales staff at Hermès stores and stands worldwide, and Rosanna thought it was important for them to have in-depth knowledge of the history of cologne. We spent two hours at L'Osmothèque discussing and smelling colognes ranging from Extra Vieille Jean-Marie Farina by Roger & Gallet, which dates from the 18th Century, Eau de Cologne Impériale by Guerlain (1853) and all the way to the newest colognes arriving on the market today."

## **2) A seminar focusing on historical fragrances of a specific brand:**

"In the fall of 2008 Helena Rubinstein was preparing an important launch for the fragrance, Wanted. As Helena Rubinstein had not launched a perfume in more than fifteen years, top executives recognized the importance of understanding the history of the brand which dates back to the beginning of the century. As fate would have it, Mr. Kerléo worked for Helena Rubinstein at the beginning of his career, and because of the relationship of trust that resulted from this collaboration, L'Osmothèque is in the unique position of having all the Helena Rubinstein perfumes. Since L'Oréal did not have any of these perfumes in house, I went to the Helena Rubinstein office and in a specially arranged seminar, gave a presentation to the marketing team, all of whom were too young to have known the array of Helena Rubinstein perfumes launched in the 1950s. They were curious to smell the perfumes their brand had made at the time and also wanted to know the history of the perfumes created in the 1920s. In this precise case, L'Osmothèque had an important role of transmitting our perfume heritage, and we were very happy to do this. Obviously, this was a special case because we have all the Helena Rubinstein perfumes, and we would not be able to do this for every brand. We do, however, have an enormous range of historic fragrances, so the possibilities are vast."

"It's worth mentioning a few more examples of training sessions that can address participants ranging from at-counter sales personnel for distribution groups such as Beauty Success Perfumery, Marionnaud Perfumery and Sephora, to international sales reps for brands such as CHANEL, to perfume evaluators for companies like International Flavors & Fragrances, Givaudan and Firmenich. I have to say that the caliber of instruction and smelling is unavailable anywhere else in the world because nobody else has all the old perfumes or the level of our documentation. And since we are all Perfumers by profession, our presentations are the very best there are."

"One of L'Osmothèque's important goals at this time is to increase visibility with these clients. I was recently encouraged in my efforts when I noticed that the President of one of the large composition companies was in the crowd, completely discreet and anonymous, during the last public seminar before Christmas. I like to think

that what we are offering is intriguing to our potential clients, and they are asking themselves 'What's going on here? We need to find out more.'"

"Keeping our perfume collection alive and current by preserving, updating and enlarging it is another essential part of our mission. This enormous and ongoing task is not unlike that of the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF) or the US Library of Congress both of which endeavor to store at least one copy of every published work. To this end, L'Osmothèque's Perfumers are constantly evaluating our stock to ensure freshness and fidelity. In a recent example, Yves Tanguy, a Senior Perfumer at L'Osmothèque, observed during a routine evaluation of our supply of Le Vétiver de Carven (1957) that the top note had lost some of its power. Soon afterwards, according to L'Osmothèque's strict procedure, Mr. Kerléo reconstructed a new batch using the identical raw materials specified in the original formula—which is kept in our safe."

"The new batch of Le Vétiver de Carven, is absolutely fresh and exactly the same product that was conceived in the original formula 53 years ago. Because of these rigorous precautions and procedures, we have enormous confidence in the authenticity and freshness of our perfumes. We can, of course, only do this for perfumes for which we have the original formulae. When other perfumes deteriorate we must rely on the brands to respond to our requests for updated examples. Just the other day, we asked Caron to replace ten such fragrances. CHANEL does this for us regularly, as does Guerlain."

"As new perfumes are launched, we are constantly adding them to our collection—sorting, labeling and categorizing them. The historic importance of this activity might not be immediately obvious because it's hard to imagine that many of today's star perfume launches might be forgotten tomorrow and eventually lost for posterity unless L'Osmothèque collects and maintains them. Some brands are conscientious in sending us their perfumes as soon as they are launched, and I am thankful for this. In any event, for all brands, maintaining current and up-to-date stocks in L'Osmothèque's cave is as much in their interest as it is in ours. The beneficial use Helena Rubinstein made of L'Osmothèque's stock of their extinct fragrances for the launch of Wanted is but one excellent example of how this could play out for any number of brands at some future date. If there was one message I could communicate to brands worldwide it would be this—please help us keep our stocks of your collections up to date!"

"As part of communication and outreach, we published *Once Upon A Time...Perfume* because it offers an overview of the L'Osmothèque history, smelling samples of a dozen mythical perfumes, as well as stories and adventures of the great perfume houses that have played important roles in perfume—Houbigant, Lesourd Pivert, Lubin, Poiret, Guerlain, CHANEL, Dior, Hermès, Lancôme, Jean Patou, Caron [and suppliers] Givaudan,

Firmenich, IFF and Robertet.”

“L’Osmothèque also has an important and thriving “Friends of L’Osmothèque” comprised of corporate and individual members. Friends of L’Osmothèque publishes the bi-lingual (French/English) quarterly review *Les Nouvelles de L’Osmothèque* with news and articles of interest to perfume professionals and perfume lovers, and members are entitled to free admission to seminars and lectures taking place throughout the year. For further information, contact **Sophie d’Auber** at [sdauber@akeonet.com](mailto:sdauber@akeonet.com).”

“As for external communication, we started off 2010 with lots of new developments. For example, on January 4, I spoke with journalists from Metropole 6 (M6), a [cultural] TV channel. L’Osmothèque will be featured in a program about perfume to be aired this summer on the popular Sunday evening program, *Zone Interdite*.”

“With all these activities, we need more space, as L’Osmothèque is literally bursting at the seams of its current home. Indeed, more than supplementary space, we need a *new* space, as what I envision for L’Osmothèque is not a museum but rather an institute with a cultural section, as well as a research center, a conservatory, a place for archives, conferences, etc. The need for this is evident as can be seen by the increasing success of our professional smelling seminars. Public demand is there as well. You only need to count the number of tour buses that pull up every day in front of Paris’ only answer to a perfume museum, the tiny Fragonard Perfume Museum, which really only represents a single brand.”

“There are other such institutes in Paris—Paris Fashion Institute, Institute of Architecture and Arab World Institute—but there is no Institute of Perfume, and we desperately need something like this now. The Fédération Française de la Parfumerie is working on a project of this sort now, but I don’t know how far it will be able to advance because it is very difficult to set up a perfume museum in Paris, and such a project could take five or ten years to accomplish.”

## L’OSMOTHÈQUE MAY EXPAND TO NEW YORK

Ms. de Nicolai continued, “L’Osmothèque engenders enormous interest in America, particularly in New York, the second largest creative center for perfumes in the world after Paris. Firmenich, Givaudan, IFF and others all have important locations there and recognize the importance of understanding the earliest stages of perfume industrial-



L’Osmothèque’s Laeticia Navarro and Ms. de Nicolai

ization, so much of which took place at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, primarily in France.”



CFP’s Gérard Delcour

He would like to open a L’Osmothèque center in New York so as to reveal its greatness to American, and has generously offered his services for the benefit of L’Osmothèque, including the possibility of training New York Perfumers as L’Osmothèques to lead the seminars using samples from a small part of our collection. He would also undertake the steps necessary for the special contracts and confidentiality clauses. At the beginning, of course, this would be a tiny, *microscopique* venture. Even so, it’s a huge undertaking, and there’s no doubt that here we are embarking on a great Adventure with a capital A.”

“As President of L’Osmothèque, I have been invited to speak at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington. **Luca Turin**, a notable research professor at MIT asked me to join him on a program there about perfume and L’Osmothèque that is partially sponsored by the French Embassy. Later in the year, again thanks to the keen interest of the Cultural Council of the French Embassy, I will tour the US for a week in November 2010 to speak about L’Osmothèque and perfume to the Alliance Française chapters across the country.”

## A MISSION

Ms. de Nicolai added, “These are just portions of L’Osmothèque’s plans and activities. There’s an enormous program on the ground and in the works, a veritable mission for the next ten years. And this is only the beginning of the new decade! L’Osmothèque, although still small and confidential, already has an enormous presence and potential. It’s no longer possible to say ‘L’Osmothèque, will it survive or not?’ There can be no doubt that L’Osmothèque’s time has come. It has a life and a force of its own. There can be no stopping it. What we need now are people with vision and dreams large enough to recognize and empower L’Osmothèque’s future. This is the heart of the matter.”

*Once Upon A Time...Perfume* is published by Éditions du Garde-Temps and is available online at [www.garde-temps.net](http://www.garde-temps.net).  
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