

At Arcania, incense infuses the apothecary of Richard Howard (opposite), who uses rare Mysore sandalwood from India for his fragrances.

# Eye of Newt and Toe of Frog

Tucked away in a quiet English village, perfumer Richard Howard creates the most extravagant concoctions from the most incredible ingredients on earth. A drop of dragon's blood, anyone?

Rhoda Koenig reports.



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tepping out of the taxi and into the wind is perhaps not the best introduction to Arcania Apothecary, but when I tell this to its owner, perfumer Richard Howard, he laughs. “We don’t mind it,” he says, gesturing to the cow pasture across the road. “It keeps us real.”

Just steps away, at his headquarters on the outskirts of the beautiful west country town of Wells, two hours from London, Howard presides over an empire of smells far lovelier and more rarefied. Seated at a “perfume organ” of dozens of tiny bottles containing ingredients from amyris to ylang-ylang or cross-legged under an embroidered Indian shawl in his herb room, Howard concocts the lotions and oils used in such swish spas as Thermae in England, Twin Farms in Vermont, and Fundu Lagoon in Zanzibar.

What sets Arcania products apart is Howard’s use of the best and freshest ingredients, no matter how expensive they are or what it takes to get his hands on them. He compares his face cream to a stew made with vegetables that have just been plucked from the cook’s garden, while mass-produced creams are akin to those made with ingredients from a can. “Smell this,” he says, taking a cinnamon stick from a package sold by a health-food manufacturer and cracking it. The scent is just a bit stronger than the ones from the jar in my kitchen cupboard. “Now this.” He pulls out a stick five times as long and three times as thick from an unmarked bag and snaps it in two. It’s like the difference between eau de toilette and perfume. “These,” he says, pointing to the first batch, “come from a highly regarded wholesaler and are in fact quite good, but they are machine-cut and heat-dried. The others are

#### TEN IMPORTANT SCENTS ACCORDING TO RICHARD HOWARD

**1. GINGER**

Infuses the body with a glowing sense of warmth

**2. HYACINTH**

One of my favorite florals, truly heavenly

**3. GRAPEFRUIT**

Incandescent citrus that revives the spirit

**4. ABELMOSK**

A musky fragrance both erotic and succulent

**5. PEPPERMINT**

Tingles the senses, stimulates, and refreshes



Arcania products are used in treatments at the Studio Psalm spa in Wells, England.



Howard mixes ingredients such as dragon's blood—the resin from *Dracaena draco* trees—and fresh licorice sticks (opposite) in his creations. His office is filled with oils and inspiration.



hand-cut and sun-dried." Next he pries open a tub and a blast of cardamom rises from pods as green as pistachios—quite a contrast to the pale brown variety I find in my supermarket. "A family in Sri Lanka grows them for me," Howard says. Then he turns to a bowl of amber powder, rare Mysore sandalwood from southern India, that is the most desirable. "The Indian government controls the level of production and the price, which has doubled in the past year and a half."

Howard, 43, keeps his business small (he employs only ten people) because of the limited availability of ingredients—and because that's the way he likes it. "I never wanted to have a huge brand or a factory," he tells me. "If I were to go down that route, I might as well be making T-shirts." Creams and oils made by larger companies, he maintains, are compounded with profit in mind, not just potency. "If you see the phrase 'aqueous extract of rose' on a label, that most likely means a very watered down concentration of the petals," Howard explains. "When you see the word 'rose' on one of my bottles, you can be sure that it contains actual rose oil."

Along with a line of lotions, oils, and perfumes, Howard creates bespoke scents. When one is requested, he arranges a fragrance interview to help him conjure up an aroma that will fit the client's personality. "I ask about color and emotion, about the

## Caveat Emptor

Members of the fragrance industry can be extremely rivalrous, quick to pour scorn on one another. Some, like pharmaceutical and large commercial beauty companies, will be contemptuous of what Howard does, saying he doesn't have access to their scientific research, while others will automatically say he is wonderful. It is a bit of a dog-chasing-its-tail issue. But there's no question that Howard's ingredients are of the highest quality, which is what matters most.

sorts of vacations they take," he says. "One person wanted a perfume that evoked Marrakech at sunrise and Paris at sunset—a combination of sophistication and mystery. Another asked for a scent that smelled like blue skies, green meadows, and white clouds." The next step is to choose the ingredients. "I have to take into consideration the client's age and coloring," he explains. "An oil will not smell the same on olive skin and pale skin." Finally, Howard produces three samples for the person to choose from. After they agree on a fragrance, he files the formula—which can also be used for soap, face cream, or any other desired product—so it can be dispatched as required.

Howard's first preparations were crafted 15 years ago for a shop he opened in nearby Bath (he has since added a store and spa in Wells). "People were just becoming aware of aromatherapy, and my then partner was one of the first fifty qualified aromatherapists in the country," he recalls. Howard himself was a broker of essential oils but yearned to be more than the middleman. During that time he went on a retreat to a Buddhist monastery in Sri Lanka, where he not only meditated but also worked in the kitchen, feeding the monks. When he woke before dawn to start on breakfast, he would see the local girls going out to pluck wild blossoms and roots—early morning being the best time to collect

CONTINUED ON PAGE 185 »

### 6. BERGAMOT

Radiantly aromatic, pure, and sensitive

### 7. PERUVIAN BALSAM

Deep, resinous, and precious

### 8. NUTMEG

One of the most mouth-watering spices

### 9. LINDEN BLOSSOM

A lusty, decadent, and fruity aroma

### 10. CHAMOMILE BLUE

Comforting oil that restores body and mind

“I USE EXOTIC ELEMENTS LIKE PATCHOULI,  
THE SCENT EQUIVALENT OF SHOCKING PINK.”



## EYE OF NEWT

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 164 »

these plants—in order to make their traditional beauty items. “It struck me that if I could show the same dedication and get ingredients of the same quality and freshness, I would be able to create something no one else had,” Howard says. He also studied perfumery in Grasse, the center of the French perfume industry. “This was useful, but it was a place that discouraged experimenting,” he recalls. “They don’t want to stray too far from the ‘little black dress’ style of perfumes, whereas I like to play up exotic elements such as patchouli, the scent equivalent of shocking pink.”

India, with its long history of herbal medicine, has been the source for much of Howard’s knowledge and inspiration. But most of his formulas have been derived from years of trial and error. “I learned to combine delicate florals with sharp citrus or strong spices,” he explains. “I found that chamomile, while it can be incredibly powerful and overwhelming, can become completely absorbed and give a perfume a wonderful resonance.”

Howard’s office is filled with a myriad of vials, arranged in his perfume organ, so

called because each oil is a note he combines to form chords, which make up the finished composition. For inspiration there is a chart of the seven chakras and the famous photo of Marilyn Monroe answering a reporter who is asking her what she wears to bed: Chanel No. 5.

When he prepares concoctions using raw plant materials—woods, flowers, gums, and resins, among others—Howard holes up in the cavelike darkness of the herb room. He settles at an oversize mortar and pestle surrounded by vats of ingredients that sound biblical (frankincense), magical (moonflower, false unicorn), and horrid (figwort). The pestle crushing the ingredients on the marble mortar produces a rhythmic beat. “You can see why frankincense is so highly prized,” says Howard, smashing the little brown pebbles into powder. “It has so much oil that even when it’s dried it is fairly soft. You can see the difference with acacia.” He puts some of the topaz-colored rocks in the bowl and when he brings down the pestle, they shatter like glass.

After blending the ingredients, Howard puts a tiny amount in a charcoal burner for a test run. The mixture, he says, could use some copal. “Copal is very direct, very

sharp. It opens doors,” he explains. “It’s a good balance for the acacia, which is quite deep and warm.” He burns and sniffs. “Ah, now we’re moving forward.” Some piñons from California join the Brazilian copal in the bowl and then on the burner. He turns to the essential oils. “Now some chamomile.” The result is “really mellow, but we want something that will give it a lift,” he says. That means jasmine. More mixing and burning brings out the verdict that we need another drop of chamomile. “But if I do that,” he says, “I need another six drops of jasmine for balance.” Howard adjusts the blend with a bit of sage, then with lavender. “I can usually sense before I mix the ingredients almost exactly what a certain combination will smell like,” he says.

When we agree that the result is both intriguing and inviting, Howard tips the contents of the bowl into a glass jar. “Now you have everything you saw me mix,” he says, “and one thing you didn’t—one thing all my scents have.”

And that is?

He smiles. “A little bit of me.” ■

*Custom scents start at \$1,900. At West Hor-  
rington, Wells, England; 44-1749/674-674;  
arcania-apothecary.com.*