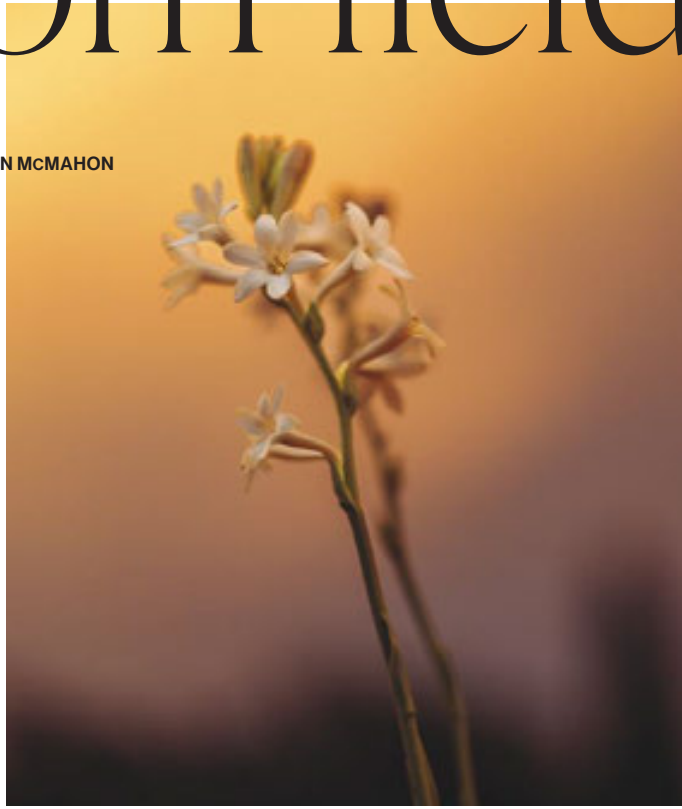


From field

PHOTOGRAPHY **BENJAMIN MCMAHON**



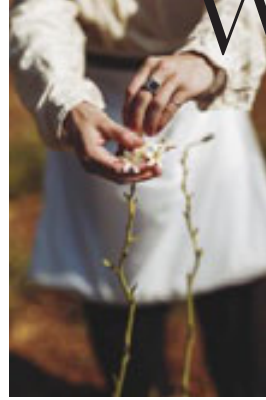
Perfumer Aurélien Guichard used to dream of growing his own ingredients. Now, on his family's farm in Grasse, he does just that. GRACE CAIN heads to the home of Matière Première

DUSK IS CREEPING ROUND THE corners of the farmhouse when the air changes. We're perched at a long table outside, where we've seen out a hot late-August day in the south of France with plenty of rosé and friendly conversation, and the best homemade aioli I've ever tasted (the aioli is significant, for reasons that will become clear). Quite suddenly, the evening turns thick with a heady floral scent drifting towards us along with the coming night. The tuberose is in bloom.

Here in Grasse, legend has it that the youth of yore were not permitted to walk near tuberose fields late at night for fear the famously sensual fragrance would lead them astray. I'm informed of this by our host, who is a reliable source on both scent and local history. Aurélien Guichard, co-founder of fragrance house Matière Première, is a seventh-generation perfumer: his family has lived in this area, which is widely regarded as the perfume capital of the world, since the French Revolution. And >

to fragrance

“Tomorrow, we will spend an idyllic few hours in the fields, mastering the art of gently pulling the white flowers from their stalks and collecting them in our aprons”



you'll probably have heard of some of the brands for whom Guichard has formulated perfumes in the past: think Gucci, Versace and Issey Miyake. Starting his own brand in 2019, however, gave him the chance to do what he had always dreamed of: growing his own ingredients. And he believes he is currently the only perfumer in the world to do so.

“Seventh-generation perfumer sounds like, very established,” he smiles (Guichard says almost everything with a hint of a smile), “but in fact, it’s just a way of life. I grew up with the pickers. I grew up with the pruners. I grew up with the rhythm of the seasons. When I started my career as a perfumer, it was just a lot of formulation – which is amazing work, but I felt there was something missing.”

That led him to return to work on the same farm where his grandparents had grown roses and jasmine, and where we now relax over an *apéro*. And this was where his friends (and eventual co-founders) Caius von Knorring and Cédric Meiffret would visit and enjoy what they refer to as ‘aioli lunches’. “They were coming here and drinking, laughing, playing boules,” Guichard recalls. “And one day, we were looking at these things growing and we said: ‘Why don’t we start a brand that’s from the field to the bottle?’” (I did hint that the aioli was life-changingly good...)

They duly envisioned fragrances that would centre around one key component, prioritising exceptional natural ingredients used in unusually high concentrations to ensure a long-lasting sillage – French speakers will have already noted that the brand’s name literally means ‘raw material’. And, taking tuberose as an example, tomorrow, we will spend an idyllic few hours in the fields, mastering the art of gently pulling the white flowers from their stalks and collecting them in our aprons (at which point I will debate quite a drastic career change). The day’s harvest will then be whisked away by Guichard himself to a nearby factory where the flowers will be used to produce the components at the heart of one of Matière Première’s most popular fragrances, French Flower.

Guichard shies away from the ‘sustainability’ buzzword, but he does acknowledge that his methods are inextricably linked with nature (indeed, all Matière Première perfumes contain between 85 per cent and 92 per cent natural ingredients). And anything he can’t produce in Grasse is sourced from carefully selected partners whose ethical values align with the brand’s own. The organic Australian sandalwood used in the brand’s Santal Austral fragrance, for example, comes from a local company called Dutjahn, which is 50 per cent indigenous-owned and only uses materials from managed lands where harvesting is complemented by replanting.

In ‘The Great Algorithm’ that we all now inhabit, the Matière Première way of doing business feels refreshing. In an outbuilding on the farm, Guichard’s lab doubles up as his mother’s art studio – she’s a sculptor, and her work gently interrupts his regimented rows of vials and perfumer’s scales. There’s also a (well-stocked) wine rack – very



This page: Aurélien Guichard in his studio on the long-established family farm in Grasse. Opposite and opening pages: A snapshot of life on the farm, including Guichard at work in the fields, an apron pocket full of flowers, bottles of French Flower, and the white-petalled tuberose flowers during the glorious Provençal days and as the sun dips at the end of the day

much needed as the fridge is jam-packed with bottles of raw ingredients.

Spending time with Guichard and his team is like hanging out with friends. But all the charm and laid-back lunches belie the perfumer’s creative ambition and the meticulous attention to detail – Guichard casually tells me that it took him more than 2,000 attempts to perfect Radical Rose, Matière Première’s first fragrance. Even then, after they initially launched the perfume to the French press, he changed his mind and dedicated another six months to reworking the formula. “Some of the journalists were a bit annoyed,” he grins. “You know, they always are. But others loved it, because at least it was authentic.”

Now, six years on, Matière Première is growing fast. In 2024, Kering Beauté took a minority stake in the company, and there are plans to open a series of stores across the globe. I’m told that in streets and on train stations around the world, Matière Première customers are frequently stopped by strangers desperate to know which fragrance they’re wearing (and I can believe it). Meanwhile, on the farm, Guichard has been hard at work planting fields of lavandin for a new fragrance he has in mind. Watching him walk happily through the fields his family have nurtured for generations, you start to understand that what really matters to him is exactly the thing that sets him apart as a perfumer. “The magical thing for me,” he smiles, “is that because of Matière Première, this place really comes alive.” □



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