

A Penhaligon's fragrance profiling session smells good

Smell ought to be the sense we elevate to the highest honour. Sure, sunsets and symphonies may consistently bag the cinematic and soundtrack gongs, but it's aroma that walks away with the Lifetime Achievement Award.

Smells evoke memories and call the other senses to the forefront. Walking past Edinburgh's Fisher's Restaurant at The Shore, the aroma takes me back to my first taste of fantastic seafood on a Mediterranean holiday. A wet golden retriever reminds me of the happiest family Christmas, and on a recent trip to North Berwick a stroll past the Lawrence Turnbull hardware store brings to mind the excitement of spending my teenage Saturday Girl shampooing tips on my first vinyl records.

The bouquet of your introduction to a decent glass of wine, the hedonism of youthful sweaty discos or the pheromones of your first kiss, smell shapes your life and doesn't allow you to forget.

I've always aimed for fairly high-end fragrances. Smelling good simply makes me feel special but I'm perhaps getting stuck in my ways. It's time for variety and I want inspiration. A fragrance profiling session at Penhaligon's might be just the ticket.

Stepping into Penhaligon's on Edinburgh's George Street is like entering a jewellery box of wonder. The presentation is simply stunning, a sophisticated blend of modern and heritage style with a dash of whimsy thrown in. Penhaligon's is a perfume house that doesn't feel 'branded' giving the products individual personality and character.



Before a scent has been sprayed I immediately know this will feel like a bespoke experience. Shop manager Michaela gave me a warm welcome and although we had to wear face masks (Michaela laments that in non Covid times they're able to offer canapés and fizz) I can see her warm and enthusiastic nature shine through her eyes. I'm set for a luxurious experience, and I'm also very relaxed. Michaela is ready to take me on a fun adventure, there will be no stuffiness here.

She began by asking me what sort of smells I'm attracted to and whether I'd like something that can be detected from a distance or a more close up experience for the lucky person whose nostrils will have the future privilege. In times like these I'm perfectly happy to have my perfume detected at

exactly a two metre distance. And how would I like my new fragrance to make me feel? Well, I think the innocent ship has sailed so let's go for sophisticated and seductive.

Whether the aim is to find a signature fragrance or something for a special occasion, the most important thing to Michaela is that we find something I fall in love with. Can a perfume deliver what Tinder has failed to? My right hand thumb is poised and I'm quietly confident.

Founded by William Henry Penhaligon, a barber from Cornwall who became court barber and perfumier to Queen Victoria, the original Penhaligon's shop was situated in Jermyn Street, next to the Savoy Turkish Baths at No.92, where William had once worked. He was a pioneer, taking inspiration from the heady aroma of the exotic goods traders were bringing into London. Sadly both buildings were destroyed in the London blitz in 1941. Fashion designer Sheila Pickles along with Italian Film director Franco Zeffirelli opened up the Covent Garden Shop and, drawing on formulas created by William Penhaligon himself, one of Britain's oldest perfume houses was reborn.

We began with Penhaligon's first formula, Hammam Bouquet, which remains one of their best sellers today, a complex aroma of base notes including musk and sandalwood with a lavender and bergamot finish. Upon the first inhale I'm reminded that I'm not here for a standard aromatic experience, and it's immediately obvious that each fragrance would smell distinctive on an individual person. They use only fine and rare ingredients and the quality is obvious.

We move onto Blenheim Bouquet, created for the Duke of Marlborough and named after his ancestral seat. This fragrance was also worn by Winston Churchill, no less, although our current PM is yet to be a brand ambassador. Michaela tells me Blenheim Bouquet can cover the smell of cigars and whisky. (Probably not buffoonism and bluster though...)

Moving onto more floral notes, wedding perfume is an obvious market for a luxury perfumier and Michaela told me that Lady Diana Spencer opted for Bluebell as part of her wedding toilette, as did Kate Moss, so purity isn't a prerequisite for favouring an innocent aroma. It's incredibly charming and I may, in the future, opt for this when I'm giving my self-proclaimed provocative persona a bank holiday weekend off.

Every concoction has a history, and Michaela has an extensive knowledge of the heritage and creation of these fascinating fragrances. One of my favourites is the inspiration behind Iris Prima, where the scent evokes the elegant yet chalky fragrance of a ballerina's dressing room, and created in partnership with the English National Ballet. Equally, Sartorial transports you to the heritage and style of Savile Row tailor Norton & Sons' workroom. This one has base notes of steam. Yes really, I know not how they do it.

Even more romantic, Oud de Nil is inspired by Cleopatra's journey down the Nile to meet her lover Marc Anthony where she had her servants coat the sails of her ship with jasmine oil, something so 'extra' even Kanye West hasn't thought of it yet. "When you walk into a room wearing this," Michaela enthused, "Everyone knows you've arrived!"

And so our own journey continues, with each fragrance Michaela produced I discovered more about what I actually like. I'm very much drawn to the more leathery deep base notes and surprisingly scents I've never been drawn to, such as lavender (which I've always thought smells of old lady) really appeals to me as a top note. I suppose it's all about balance.

Each exquisite bottle has its own personality and finish but I'm especially intrigued by the Portrait Collection, each topped with its own individual animal head, reflecting the scent's 'muse' and packaged with illustrations by Icelandic artist Kristjana Williams. A piece of art in their own right, some are inspired by characters from Downton Abbey with whisky, rum, coffee and tobacco featuring in the ingredient

list.

My favourite, and the one I leave with, is The Tragedy of Lord George. Infused with the scent of shaving soap and warm rum this is said to be a 'traditional upstanding fragrance with hidden secrets'. This is definitely an aroma that would appeal to men but when I smell it on my skin I'm in love with the serious, heady scent and feel rather alluring in it. Reader, I swiped right.

If you're stuck in a perfume rut or would like to discover not only a product more complex and mysterious but also something that will work for you as an individual, this experience would be invaluable. It would make a beautiful present for anyone but could be an especially thoughtful engagement gift for a couple.

Most importantly though it was immensely interesting and great fun. Complimentary in-house engraving is offered with every bottle, making each purchase unique.

The truth is in the wearing, so how does The Tragedy of Lord George make me smell? For those who have got close enough the survey says: lovely!

And from the more eloquent of my acquaintances: sophisticated and dangerous, if you please! Could be describing me to a T.

Yet more importantly how does it make me feel? The word that springs to mind is: expensive. I'm ready to take on the world wearing this. My stride is confident, facing the future like I mean it.

Should you wish to create your own bespoke scent, one that will be 100% exclusive to yourself, Penhaligon's can, with a year and a half of time and £350k of money, do just that for you. I'm not quite in that league of perfumery yet but every time my finger presses down on the atomiser, it's a step in the right direction.

To book your fragrance profiling session: Penhaligon's 33 George Street, EH2 2HN Tel 0131 220 3210

Penhaligons.com

