

PERFUMISTA TAKES A HOLIDAY
by Neal Patterson

A few months ago, I wrote an article for Sniffapalooza Magazine explaining my confusion over my wife's recent obsession with perfume. I didn't understand her exacting attention to specific scent notes, I seemed incapable of detecting the notes she described, and I couldn't see why there had to be so many doggone perfumes. I was thrilled when her friend Andrée agreed to go with her to New York last spring for the Sniffapalooza event, allowing me to stay home, sinuses safe from burning alcohol fumes. Little did I realize how persistent these perfumistas could be.

"...and a few weeks after we get back from vacation, we have Sniffa in New York," Kathy excitedly declared over dinner one evening.

'We?' I thought. "Why don't you invite one of your friends along?"

Kathy looked like Cindy Lou Who after the Grinch stole the Christmas tree.

"Because I want *you* to go with me?" she replied.

I hesitated. My mind filled with nightmarish visions of tall, lanky women dressed in black, atomizers at the ready, spritzing me from head to toe with acrid droplets of rose, powder, and patchouli. I also couldn't overlook that Sniffa 2007 would happen on a weekend in October. Football season. One of the masochistic rituals of a Baltimorean is watching the Ravens lose on Sunday afternoon. I couldn't miss that.

"Look, I don't have to go to everything," Kathy reasoned. "We could squeeze in some things that you would like to do as well."

I pondered. Now that she brought it up, I hadn't ever gotten around to seeing the Strand Bookstore.

“It’s only a few blocks away from Bond No. 9,” Kathy offered, brightly.

Okay, I guess I was committed.

The Fall 2007 Sniffapalooza kicked off on Saturday, October 20th with a breakfast at Bergdorf Goodman. When we entered the store, I was relieved to see three or four men already mingling among the chattering crowd. In fact, I was amazed at how many people were attending the event. Kathy introduced me to some of her perfumista friends, all of whom were bubbling with excitement over the planned events.

We were then crammed into a tiny dining area in Bergdorf-Goodman’s basement and, after a so-so breakfast of chewy bagels and fruit cup, the real excitement began. A parade of representatives from the various perfume houses stood up, one by one, and pitched their latest fragrances. While the reps would entice us with words such as “sensuous” and “sophisticated,” sample strips were passed out among us. Everyone waved these aromatic teases under their noses, oohed, aahed, and clenched their eyelids orgasmically. I would sniff and nod to Kathy, filing the scents under my usual categories of powdery, flowery, or sweet.

Each rep was greeted with enthusiastic applause, and just the presentation of the bottle was received with yelps of rapture. I didn’t feel the excitement myself, but I could appreciate the zealous passion. When I was a teenager in the late 70s, I would go to science fiction and comic book conventions. I was wildly devoted to these interests, and loved the fact that I could find others who shared them. At every convention, one of the local TV stations would send a reporter down to cover the event. That night, the news report would usually start out something like, “Well Stan, there are some whacky goings-

on down here at the Holiday Inn today as fat, ugly nerds with questionable hygiene dress up like Captain Kirk and Darth Vader...”

It was humiliating. The intrepid reporter missed the story entirely. Sure, there were some crazy fans at those things, but there were also people who simply understood the value of fantasy fiction and wanted to share in the fellowship of others who also appreciated how much joy it could bring. We also celebrated the people who created those worlds for us. We wanted to say, “We get it, and we love you for creating this wonderful avenue of enjoyment for us.” I sensed that same vibe at Sniffapalooza.

After the Bergdorf-Goodman event, Kathy was true to her word and we spent the rest of the day visiting museums and walking around New York while the others headed to the next Sniffa location. As we strolled along Central Park, I thought about how science fiction and comic book characters are so much a part of the mainstream now, thanks primarily to those “whacky” fans who so ardently promoted the cause. I could see how these scent fans could bring about a similar broadening of interest in perfume.

The next morning, we headed down to Bond No. 9 in Greenwich Village. I was actually interested in this stop since Bond was probably the first line of perfumes that introduced me to the concept of unisex scents. It was a revelation since I felt most men’s colognes were too heavy and bold, while Bond No. 9’s fragrances were simply pleasant and subtle, whether you were a man or a woman.

I have to say, the breakfast spread was better than the previous day, but I was also taken with the pleasant salespeople who were not at all like the scent guerrillas at my local mall. They were educated on the products and didn’t try to push us toward any particular fragrance. Instead, they asked about our preferences. I told one of the women

that I was currently wearing their New Haarlem, and she suggested that I try mixing it with Coney Island if I wanted a lighter scent. She sprayed some of both on my hand to illustrate the effect. The heavy coffee and vanilla notes of the New Haarlem were nicely complimented by the citrus qualities of the margarita mix note, creating a lighter fragrance that I could wear during the summer months. Yet another revelation from Bond No. 9. As we left the store and headed up Broadway toward the Strand Bookstore, I realized I had just become a fan of a perfumer.

I'm quite certain I'll never share in the kind of glowing ardor that most perfumistas have for their chosen subject of affection. As someone with particular passions of my own, however, I can fully empathize with their need to explore the subject as thoroughly as they can and always stay abreast of new developments. It's a kind of obsession you can never explain to someone who isn't inclined to giving oneself over to an all encompassing interest. In that regard, I truly do get it.