

A GREAT *L*ADY
IN PERFUMERY

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HOMAGE TO MONIQUE REMY
FOR THIRTY YEARS OF EXCELLENCE



Academy of Perfumery & Aromatics Inc.
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“In fragrantia, extasis, and don’t expect roses”

-Les Christophs

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Everyone knows the story of the exquisite larch pâté, proportions were one larch for one cow. As a young perfumer at a large corporation, I remember being on a team checking natural materials arriving into the perfumery department. There was this fragrance material called Galbanum 50%. Galbanum is extracted from an exudation of a root in Iran and smells rather green and sensual, very much used in perfumery, think *Chanel 19* and *Egoïste Platinum* by Chanel, *Alliage* by Estee Lauder, or *Nude* by Bill Blass. Galbanum resinoid 100% is viscous and sticky. Galbanum 50% is a solution obtained by mixing 50 parts of pure Galbanum resinoid with 50 parts of an odorless solvent to make it more fluid and easier to work with. Everyone actually knew, despite the name, that this Galbanum 50% was rather Galbanum 5%, in other words 5 parts of the natural oil for 95 parts of solvent. Over the years, the supplier had secretly cut the Galbanum 50% little by little with more solvent, to bring its price down, so much so that the original denomination has now become totally fallacious. There are also enough examples of Patchouli oils, market price is roughly 80 dollars per kilo, being cut with Gurjum Balsam,

market price is roughly 8 dollars per kilo, needless to say with a lot less character and a lot less long-lastingness than Patchouli oil itself. The race to preserve margins over the years paired with the general demand for cheaper and cheaper products had incited the suppliers to adulterate, politely said to extend, their own precious products.

Parisian, analytical chemist and later chief executive officer of her own company, Monique Remy has saved perfumery from a dangerous cuisine.

Remy graduated with degrees in Biology and Chemistry. In the early sixties, she was head of analytical research for the organic chemistry department at Unilever Ltd. in Paris, France. She remembers her reaction one day after noticing a lavender field in Provence on the cover page of an issue of *Recherche* magazine. “*This* is the kind of environment where one should be working” she told her boss. A few months and interviews later, with a four year old daughter, she announces to her husband “I’m going”. She transferred to a small Unilever subsidiary in Grasse in 1964. “I like challenges, South of France

at the time was like the Middle Age to me, with only very slow trains and no cheap plane tickets to get there.” Christian Remy, her husband of more than 40 years, followed as purchasing manager for perfume materials. The two have been working and traveling in this manner, Monique as technical manager, Christian as purchasing manager. The world was their farmers’ market, purchasing from hibiscus seeds in Ecuador to galbanum gum in Iran, or mimosa and jasmynes in India, to mention a few of the 200+ extracts existing today on their list.

Remy set up the first laboratory in this subsidiary to utilize a new technology which has since revolutionized perfumery: chromatography, the best and the worst of things. This is the analytical method which allows one to determine the composition of a natural essence or a full fragrance. Roughly, a fragrance formula is a combination of 30 to 150 materials, chosen from 2,000 to 3,000 components available on the perfumer’s shelves. The proportions in the formulas of these ingredients are also extremely important. Chromatography allows you to determine with a good accuracy compositions and proportions

of natural materials and of finished fragrances. It can be called the eye of the perfumer, but not his nose. Remy specifically optimized chromatography to verify the origin and the quality content of natural essences, so much so that she became an authority in the matter. As a determined woman scientist, she surprised more than one of her male colleagues. Her integrity and managerial qualities gave her rapid fame in the profession and protected her from dodgy endeavors.

In the early seventies, when most people would marry their companies for life, she decided the time was right to switch to another company.

She had to start her fundamental work all over again with her new host, whose name we will not divulge. She was eventually asked to not only restructure and develop what was an embryony analytical laboratory there, but soon to manage the entire factory as well. "It's always been about the same rules: establish serious quality control, rationalize archaic means of production, consider your factory workers as professional adults" she announces simply, although you can see in her facial expression the tough times she went through to make simplicity, fairness, and honesty accepted rules. "It is well known that the most difficult part is always to change

people's mindsets" she notes, adding how many times she heard "your chromatography will not improve company earnings". Today chromatography is a part of everyday activity of any fragrance house, any food and beverage house, any pharmaceutical company, and any fine material supplier. This is also the time when she started exploring a new purification technology: molecular distillation. This is the purification which takes place under very high vacuum and lower temperature, to preserve the freshness of natural essences and absolutes.

In the mid seventies, new laws were enacted on the contents and compositions of cosmetic products. Her analytical expertise became a salvation for major clients such as Chanel, Rochas, Patou, Guerlain and L'Oreal. Thanks to her understanding manager, she was allowed to meet with these prestigious clients directly, although she was part of a technical department, not an habitual practice at all at the time. Analysts everywhere had to be taught to refuse a sample if its quality was not optimum. As a seamstress, Remy's mother had taught her the value of beauty and infused her with a passion to continuously search for aesthetics and for the best quality. Remy made it a point to fight, until her retirement, for beauty and quality. One day her employer asked her to adulterate products so they would be less expensive, in a way which would not be detectable with chromatographies at the competition's or the clients'. As an expert detective whose knowledge of most tricks allows her to detect those of others', Remy could have fulfilled the mission, but this was against her principles of integrity. "If clients have always bought from me, it is because they know that they can trust me." With a husband buying natural raw materials directly from producers around the world, she had access to genuine pure

OPEN LETTER TO MONIQUE REMY

New York, May 8, 2003

Dear Monique,

Thank you so much for the kind words which you sent us by email a few weeks ago. I hope you fully enjoy the start not of a retirement but of a new adventure. We are happy for you.

As for me, I am very sad. Quality and prestige can only be defended by strong personae like yours. They can easily be drowned by facility, and usually, in the long term, pulling down with them human and financial prospects. I hope that Bernard will strive to remain as determined as you were, and that maybe, after the euphoria, you will come back among us.

I strongly believe in the development of natural materials for Perfumery, not only because of the unduplicatable scents and the client-moving dreams they provide, but also for their humanitarian aspects with populations and natural environments; they can grow the image of Perfumery.

It is a geo-climatic-biological fact that most scented plants interesting for Perfumery happen to grow in some economically challenged regions of the world. By tradition these regions have developed a very specialized labor force for detailed, and one must recognize, sometimes fastidious tasks. The development of natural ingredients for perfumery, as carefully and relentlessly as you have been pursuing it, is a fabulous opportunity to provide farmers with a substantial revenue source, noble and more respectable. It can free them a little from the shackles of large volume, low added value, and even controversial productions, such as coffee, cotton, soy, tea or tobacco. In its April 25, 2003 issue, the Financial Times wrote: "Traditional cash crops are at their lowest price ebb for years" and citing the instance of Uganda : « The vagaries of world markets have been encouraging increasing numbers of farmers as well as foreign investors to test the soils on new products." Perfumery, through the development of natural materials the way you have been leading it, respectful of prices and of actual growers, can uplift its image incommensurably.

Further to this human benefit, the cultivations of the large variety of plants needed in perfumery maintain a unique diversity of indigenous biotopes, and thus of landscapes in these regions -from Auvergne to Zambia- which we all enjoy during our vacations. They participate significantly in the protection of animal and plant species living on or off of these perfumery plants.

We are all seeking new reasons to encourage the public to wear fragrances more often and of higher quality. What could be nobler than bringing forward such human and environmental elements? Many industries dream of being able to promote a world consciousness. Thanks to your principles and your determination, we can and will do it in Perfumery.

Monique, I am sending you all my best wishes of happiness for a second long life, and hoping our paths will cross again many more times.

Yours faithfully,

Christophe Laudamiel

qualities and thus knew what her standards were. In fact her reference system became and is still *the* reference in the industry, giving her the confidence to assert "no-one has ever been in front of me for

quality".⁽¹⁾ Her products, are labeled with the now famous "LMR Reference A" tagline.

In 1984, with the equivalent of €3,000, she decided to launch her own company under a name which

clients suggested themselves “Laboratoire Monique Remy” (LMR). Remy’s vision was at first to simply create a trustful analytical lab, with “a desk, a chromatograph and a telephone”. However, clients such as Jacques Polge and Francois Demachy, perfumers at Chanel, convinced her to start her own production with her own guarantee of purity, just about the only guarantee they could still trust. At the time, she estimated that the number of truly pure natural products reaching the perfumers’ benches was close to zero. She went on what she called “a crusade for pure products”, she would directly visit perfumers at the different perfume houses. Perfumers had to learn again

how to integrate pure expensive products into their formulas.

If you ask Remy what her basic principles have always been, she answers with no hesitation “Quality and customer service, there are no other recipes”. Remy’s employees consist not only of her production teams, but also of all the farmers and cooperatives around the world with whom she and her husband sign contracts. To secure quality, they never pressure farmers to decrease their selling prices, and they avoid intermediate wholesalers as much as possible. Because they deal with natural products, with climatic fluctuations and with competition from large volume items such as coffee or

soybeans (see attachment on the subject), contracts are signed for several years to gain trust and production assurance. A cut in production often leads to adulteration in order to make up for the missing quantity.

Remy has now sold her company to a large fragrance house, International Flavors & Fragrances Inc., which has promised to keep those core principles alive. She has retired to enjoy the company of her husband, daughter, son and grand children. ■■■

⁽¹⁾In all fairness, other companies have since joined the bandwagon, such as Bompard Aromatiques srl, Calchauvet-Danisco, Capua srl or Biolandes.



PHOTOGRAPH CREDITS

Photographs are courtesy of Les Christophs, except otherwise noted:

Page 7 Remy evaluating materials from around the world (courtesy of IFF)

Page 8 LMR caps (courtesy of IFF); Chromatograph instrument; Mimosa flowers, Provence

Page 10 Remy preparing her next endeavor

Page 11 Snowy bitter orange twigs and fruit, Provence

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christophe Laudamiel is a world renowned perfumer. Qualified as the “enfant terrible of perfumery” by www.s-perfume.com, he has created for major global brands and for upscale niche markets in New York, London and Berlin. Two of his fragrances received the prestigious New York Fifi awards. He received the Perfumers’ Choice Award in 2003 and holds several chemistry recognition awards.