

**Potentino Profumò**  
**The Story of a Perfume and the Scent Walk that Inspired It**  
by Susan Barbour

In my mind, the grounds of Castello di Potentino are always gold—even though, for much of the year, they're actually vibrant green. I imagine that's because I always hiked at evening, just before sunset, when blue light scatters, and the sun's longer rays cast the land in reddish warmth. But it's also because of a synesthesia I experienced whenever I closed my eyes and smelled the air.

I was invited to be one of Potentino's artists-in-residence in early 2020. My residency quickly became a lockdown in what was then the global epicenter of the pandemic. Of course, my fellows and I recognized we were fortunate to spend our lockdown in a castle—one equipped with its own vineyard, olive grove, chickens, geese, and sustainable farm. Still, with so little known about the virus at that time and with airports chaotically closing, I was also vaguely terrified; I didn't know if I'd ever get to return home or see my family again. During that time, two things saved me: eating delicious meals from the land with my castle cohort of seven international women and daily scent walks.

Potentino sits nestled in the valley of Monte Amiata, an extinct volcano, and the bowl-like structure of the land makes it a perfect trap for sun and rain. It's a natural haven for biodiversity, creating one of the most complex environmental bouquets I've ever smelled. I went there intending to capture it all in the form of an artisanal perfume. And, while I had very little experience with botany, I was determined to do this by discovering the smells in the wild.

I'm a poet, artist, scholar, wine expert—and now perfumer. After decades of learning to sniff out a wine's origin and describe its smell, I assembled a perfume lab and taught myself to create—and not just analyze—a bouquet. Today I use perfumery to capture the smell of endangered ecosystems so as to protect their aromas from vanishing.

The environmental perfumes I seek to create are more akin to poems or paintings than exact replicas. They are artefacts of consciousness, a record of one person's encounter with an environment's bouquet. If I wanted to, I could take a sample of Potentino's air, then, back at a high-tech laboratory, use headspace technology and gas chromatography to recreate the valley's actual chemical composition, molecule by molecule. But then, my perfume would not be a work of art, just as a photograph of the skies and cypresses in Arles is not the same as experiencing van Gogh's *Starry Night*. Rather than offering a literal scent in a bottle, I seek to give people a new enchantment with their own noses. Primed by the scent of my Potentino perfume, you can appreciate new aspects of the scent of Potentino's landscape.

This bottle is a record of my most enchanted moments walking through Potentino's hills to discover its scents. My scent walks became a daily ritual. Every day around four o'clock I'd walk the castle grounds, always with Circe, the castle's chocolate Labrador, at my side—or more accurately, a short distance away, as she often hopped off-piste to chase down exciting scent trails of her own.

Each olfactory note in this perfume was a much-needed, much-longed-for and yet totally unexpected epiphany—a stilling of an otherwise busy and overactive mind. I must have whispered to and gingerly broken off leaves from over a hundred different species of plants while I was there. Occasionally, I hit olfactory gold. After several seconds of a deep inhale, I would feel a tingle run across my scalp and a smile spread across my face. Then I'd find myself in my favorite state of mind, the tantalizing longing to describe a sensation I still had no name for: I'd find myself in the moment just before poetry.

Each day I'd return to the castle with plant samples stuffed into every one of my pockets. Then I'd confirm, with the help of various field guides, which plants I had discovered. I'll never forget when I first smelled *elecrisio*, or Immortelle. Up until that point, I had known immortelle only as a red liquid in a glass vial. I knew nothing about the plant, had no visual image of it or knowledge of where and how it grew. I also knew it by the scent of its blossoms, but its leaves had a different, perhaps even more magnificent smell: a spicy-sweet aroma reminiscent of Indian curry or chai tea, so strong that people who grow up around it often refer to the plant as “curry grass.” Without knowing it, I had stumbled upon one of the greatest and most-loved floral scents in all of perfumery.

Once I was able to recognize a couple dozen aromatic plants by sight, I began assembling my favorite ones in different combinations and binding them together with a blade of grass. I would hold these tiny bouquets under my nose, walking along for hours to quiet my mind and observe the aromatic synergies. Plant by plant and step by step, I began to compose the shape—and color—of my Potentino perfume. Back in my castle room, where I'd assembled a portable nose organ, or collection of about a hundred dropper vials of aromatic materials, I took my samples and set about translating them into liquid form.

Meanwhile I spent many late nights fielding worried phone calls from friends back home. Italy's lockdown was headline news, and most of the world was still in denial that we were their future. A few made quips about my plush accommodations and alluded to a famous medieval precedent: in Giovanni Boccaccio's fourteenth-century story collection *The Decameron*, which Pier Paolo Pasolini adapted into the 1971 film by the same name, ten pilgrims escape the dangers of The Plague in Florence by fleeing to a castle in Tuscany. There they pass the time by telling one another stories, one hundred tales that become the core of Boccaccio's text. Reading *The Decameron* at

Potentino, what struck me most was not the poet's witty plot twists or even the parallels of being in a Tuscan castle during The Plague—rather, it was what Bocaccio had to say about smell.

In his non-fiction frame essay to *The Decameron*, Bocaccio describes opposing extremes of behavior during The Plague years. There were those who “shut themselves up in houses where none had been sick” and, conversely, those who chose to go out and carouse “now to this tavern, now to that.” But Bocaccio goes on to describe a fascinating “middle course” of people whose distinguishing characteristic, apart from moderation, was that they “went about, carrying in their hands, some flowers, some odoriferous herbs and other some divers kinds of spiceries, which they set often to their noses, accounting it an excellent thing to fortify the brain with such odours....”

In his observation that odor could “fortify the brain,” Bocaccio apprehended a curious neurological phenomenon unique to smell. The olfactory cortex sits next to the limbic system, which is the seat of our memories and desires. Our immediate reactions to smell do not involve the frontal cortex, which is responsible for rational thought, analysis, and cognitive simulations of the future. When we smell things mindfully, we circumvent tired grooves of thought and allow fresh perception to occur.

At the end of March 2020, I made an emergency evacuation out of Italy to see my family. The State Department had ordered Americans abroad to go home immediately or be prepared to stay where they were indefinitely. Italian police were patrolling the streets to enforce stay-at-home orders. I paid a taxi driver 500 euro to risk his life, his family, and his job in order to escort me in the middle of the night from the Tuscan countryside to Rome Fumicino airport. Once I arrived at the airport, thinking of nothing but pandemics and perfume, I saw an article about a curious symptom of Covid-19: anosmia, or the loss of smell.

Since that time, many people across the world began to reappraise the sense of smell as an essential aspect of existence. Smell is not only instrumental to survival (as when we detect a gas leak or a fire); it also connects us to each other and to our natural surroundings in subconscious ways. The smells of nature are a subtle and sophisticated communication happening among and between species all the time. Moths can smell pheromones from a mile away. Trees communicate information about pests and diseases through compositional changes in their aromatic resins. Animals leave scent trails to mark their presence. An environment's bouquet is a volatilized sea of languages—messages relaying an incomprehensibly complex network of information that sustains the web of natural life. The revaluing of smell brings us back to this basic truth. And the same cooperative intelligence that runs between all living things—we evolved from this as well.

In March 2022, exactly two years after my residency turned lockdown, I returned to Potentino to finish my perfume and map out the steps of the scent walk that inspired it. Encountering these plants, sources of some of the most prized materials in a perfumer's palette, by chance and in their

natural habitat, was a life-altering experience. This perfume and this scent walk are my invitation to you to chance upon your own unforgettable trysts with nature—real or imagined—in Potentino’s hills. It is also my invitation for you to practice the art of scent walking everywhere. May it fortify your brain as it has mine.

## THE POTENTINO SCENT WALK

This walk takes you through Potentino’s hills where you can find and smell some of my favorite olfactory treasures. By following this walk, you will encounter, in situ, the key facets of my perfume formula: labdanum, oakmoss, treemoss, marigold, lentisco, immortelle leaves, and cypress. You will also meet with a few other aromatic highlights (lavender, savory, rosemary, grape hyacinth, asparagus, calamint, and violet), which while they do not feature into my perfume, are still incredible smells that possess many of the same common denominator aromatic molecules of its formula, including beta-pinene, caryophyllene, and limonene.

In a few cases, this walk directs you toward a specific planted tree on the property. In other cases, it gives a general sense of where you may discover samples growing in the wild. A scent walk is enjoyable in part because it requires heightened attentiveness and determination to experience a smell. It may take you a bit of time to locate some of the plants, but once you find them you will start to see them everywhere.

When you do locate a plant on the list, please use good judgement as to how much to harvest. I recommend trying to smell the plant without picking it in the first case. Often, you can smell a lot by simply rubbing the underside of leaves. If you tear off a sample, it’s best to stick to tiny sprigs.

Beginning at the bottom of the ramps in front of the castle, cross the road to follow the sign up to the pool. On the way up, on either side of the path, you will see cistus and wild asparagus. Continue up to the right of the pool, past the large olive tree and then bear right to walk up to the steep earthen terrace. Where the terrace begins to bend, you will find clumps of savory. Next, turn around to head back down toward the pool. Around the pool’s perimeter you’ll find lavender and rosemary. Walk to the northern edge of the pool and you’ll see a stone footpath down the hillside into the grassy area beside the Pinot Noir vineyard. Turn left to find the fig tree and smell the fig leaf. In the grassy area around the tree, you may also find examples of mentuccia, violet, and grape hyacinth.

Head down the road with the vines on your right. Stop to smell the bright orange calendula growing between the vines. Then head down the road, continuing straight onto the footpath that takes you to the end of the vineyard and up into the orchard. You will pass a huge oak tree covered in tree moss. Continue up the footpath through the olive grove where you will find fennel in the grass. Once you turn back toward the castle you will find on your right patches of immortelle or “curry

grass.” You will also see tall clumps of ginestra or broom which has fragrant yellow flowers in spring and also a wonderful green smell if you scrape its stems. The path will merge with the road where you will find more oak trees covered in oak moss. (If you are feeling adventurous you can hike up to the top of the road, where you will find clumps of hyssop, before turning downhill again.)

Cross the road and follow the wooden hiking trail sign through the grassy area. The path eventually curves left to go over the ditch and then back up toward the castle. While you pass through the grasses keep an eye (and nose) out for any more examples of the plants which you should by now be able to recognize: calamint, fennel, violet, grape hyacinth, etc. Walk up past the chicken coop to climb up the first terrace, which is lined with a row of quince trees that smell lovely when in blossom. Follow the terrace back down to the carpark, where you can smell the rosemary and finish by smelling the leaves of the majestic cypress.

