

The scent of success

Cath Collins tells KATHRYN KELLY about her thriving fragrance company, and how she gets inspiration for her scents

The Cath Collins fragrance company is discreetly tucked away in a tiny hamlet between the hills of Dartmoor and the South Devon coast. Unless you have precise directions, it's extremely difficult to find - deliberately so, for the business is based at Cath's home and not in a factory as one might presume, as it has since the business started in 1987.

Following a re-launch in 2010, the company is thriving, with a number of new fragrances and product lines - and a growing army of fans. The vibrant, naturally-inspired perfumes are quintessentially English - a cross between the distinctive scents of Floris and Jo Malone - in luxurious, stripped packaging. They are sold in specialist shops around the UK, including two stores here in Devon. Devotees are said to include a senior, albeit nameless, female member of the Royal Family and singer Lionel Ritchie.

Cath has had a passion for scent since she was a young child. "My maternal grandparents lived near Grasse in the South of France. I was enchanted by the intoxicating aromas of jasmine, lavender and mimosa from the fields below their house. Both my mother and my father loved good fragrances, and I remember on one occasion being taken to a perfume shop in Cannes. We were given miniature bottles of classic perfumes, which was a wonderful gift for a child."

When her children were young, Cath made and sold embroidery kits at charity fairs, and it was then that she spotted a gap in the market. "I looked around and realised that nobody was selling anything that smelled lovely - the kind of thing I'd like to find in my Christmas stocking, or bath oils to buy as a gift for a friend," she explains.

Cath spent £25 on organic essential oils from a health food shop in Totnes and began experimenting. "I started by dripping essential oils into a base, making detailed notes throughout the process. My first attempt was a mixture of



Above: Cath Collins Below: One of her perfume bottles

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grapefruit and Neroli - otherwise known as orange blossom. I sourced 50 bottles, made some labels on the computer and stuck them on with glue. When the first batch of oils sold, I started work on another fragrance."

As the products were snapped up and her confidence grew, Cath expanded her range to include perfumes, soaps and hand and body lotions. Her big break came when she was spotted by high-profile designer Cath Kidston, famous for her floral prints. "Cath let me have a corner of her stand at a trade fair and then asked me to put my products in her flagship London store. I owe her a great deal."

Many years on and Cath still personally creates each scent - the desk in her office is covered with tiny bottles and wooden sticks. How it's all done is, of course, a closely-guarded secret. The complex mixing part of the process is completed by two elusive perfumers, who are both local. The products are manufactured by an unnamed company in Tiverton, before being returned to the company's headquarters for packaging and posting.

The inspiration for her new fragrances often strikes at unexpected times. "I had an operation one spring and while I was recovering wafts of wisteria, which grows over the front of the house, drifted in through the open window. Inspiration hit and I couldn't wait to capture the scent."

Many of Cath's fragrances appeal to both men and women. Lemon Flower, which is zesty with a floral aromatic heart and a base of patchouli and amber, is one of these scents. Another is Flowers of The Orient, which has patchouli and vetiver, with a centre of peony, rose and freesia, spiced with pink pepper.

Cath says the secret to her business success is making people feel better about themselves. "For women in particular, locking the bathroom door and slipping into delightfully fragrant waters, might be the only time in the day that they get to themselves. It's an affordable luxury." ■

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