

# The juice



Iso E Super was never meant to be a perfume. An aroma chemical with an alluring woody accord, it was used by scientists to bring an olfactory richness to everything from fine fragrances to floor cleaners. That was until a novice perfumer, enamoured by this enigmatic ingredient, struck upon the idea to bottle it and sell it as a pair of fragrances in its own right. It would be called Escentric Molecules 01, and it would become the scent sensation of the 21st century. Text by Richard O'Mahony, photography by Mathilde Agius

#### Speakers

(in order of appearance):

- Tim Blanks, fashion journalist
- Susan Irvine, writer
- Geza Schoen, perfumer
- Paul White, graphic designer
- Linda Pilkington, perfumer
- Daniela Rinaldi, concessions and beauty director, Harvey Nichols
- Anna-Marie Solowij, beauty journalist
- Chandler Burr, perfume writer and curator
- Bibi Lynch, journalist
- Brix Smith-Start, musician
- Professor Hanns Hatt, chair, Department of Cell Physiology, Ruhr-Universität Bochum, Germany
- Vladimir Davidi, perfume distributor, Russia

#### The Dream

Tim Blanks, presenter, *Fashion File*, 1989–2006; editor-at-large, *Style.com*, 2006–15: Geza had been nursing this perfume dream for some time, this Escentric Molecules.

Susan Irvine, beauty columnist, *The Sunday Telegraph*, 1996–2006; international beauty director, *Condé Nast Asia-Pacific*, 1997–2006: Geza and I met in 2002 when I was working with Zowie Broach and Brian Kirkby of Boudicca on their fragrance, *Wode*. The brief was to create a perfume that captured the aftermath of battle: the burning smells, the horse leather, the abstract scents of northern forests – very Celtic. Geza immediately understood what they needed to capture all of this in a fragrance; he was the perfect perfumer for the job. Around the same time, Jeff Lounds, Tim Blanks's partner, who was the director of the creative agency Southpaw, told me he was working with Bombay Sapphire on

a fragrance based on the botanicals of a gin and tonic.

Tim Blanks: Bombay Sapphire wanted to do something different as a promotional tool, so Jeff suggested a perfume using the aromatic ingredients in its gin. Susan, or Aurora, as we know her, is one of Jeff and my best friends – I mean, a long-time venture, based around a shared love of night-clubs like Trade and DTPM – so she introduced Jeff to Geza.

Geza Schoen, perfumer: Infusion was the perfume we ended up creating for Bombay Sapphire. It had bright and zesty citrus notes, juniper berries and light spice notes. It was a one-off release in 2003, limited to airport duty-frees. The project went really well, the fragrance got a great reaction, so I told Jeff about my idea for a perfume.

Susan Irvine: During one of those late-night sessions when we were making *Wode*, Geza arrived with these incredible ingredients, and in the midst of the banter and the sniffing and the smoking and the drinking, he told us about his own idea for a fragrance

based upon Iso E Super<sup>a</sup>. And I remember how taken we were by hearing “Iso E Super”. It sounded so enigmatic, so futuristic.

Geza Schoen: The idea sparked when I smelled Iso E Super for the first time when training as a perfumer with Haarmann & Reimer in the 1990s. And as I learned the formulae of other fragrances, it became clearer to me why I liked certain ones: they all had a high content of Iso E Super. I remember saying to my teacher at Haarmann & Reimer, “Can you imagine wearing Iso E Super on its own?” He balked at the idea. Iso E Super is just an ancillary ingredient, an accelerant, for other perfumers. As an ingredient, I think Iso E Super has everything a perfumer could possibly want. Radiance: it boosts and enhances other ingredients. Tenacity: it wraps itself around the other ingredients so lasts for a long time. Power – but not pungent. Some people can’t smell it.<sup>b</sup> I thought, Wouldn’t it be nice to create a perfume for all these people who actually don’t think they like fragrance because they feel they’re too fruity, too sweet, too much? Or for those who’d like to have some fragrance identity but don’t want to smell too fragrant?

Susan Irvine: And he wanted to call it Escentric Molecules. Geza really liked that particular pun on the spelling.

Tim Blanks: I remember thinking the name was a bit naff. Like “the Beatles” is a terrible name for a rock group, but you know, after a while it’s the only thing you can imagine.

Susan Irvine: There would be two separate fragrances that would be launched together – very logical, very German in a way. It would be just the molecule in one bottle, 100 per cent Iso E Super, and it would be called Molecule 01. In the other, Iso E Super would again be the star, but at a 65 per cent concentration, expressed in a different way, with ancillary ingredients around it, such as lime peel, Hedi-one, orris, fresh musk, benzoin, mastic and incense, that would enhance it and give it lift. This would be called

Escentric 01. Immediately, the project had this simplicity and elegance.

Geza Schoen: I worked on the first Diesel fragrance in 1994, when Diesel was one of the coolest brands on the planet. Originally, I pitched this idea of a single-*aroma-chemical* fragrance to the sales team, but they thought it was too far-fetched. It was all about big, voluptuous, complex structures and frames at the time. No one was thinking: Instead of putting 100 ingredients in here, why don’t we just put one?

Susan Irvine: When we first smelled Iso E Super, I think all you could see on our faces was bewilderment. It had an otherness. It hovers very close to the skin, dense and dark, but it has a transparency. So much so that it actually disappears and comes back again.<sup>c</sup> It also has an abstract, woody quality – a wood that’s growing on matter. We thought, Wow! What’s this mysterious otherworldly thing that’s dropped like a lump of black rock from space? I recall Geza describing Iso E Super as smelling like something between cedar wood and his girlfriend’s armpit.

Tim Blanks: Geza always told a story about being in a bar in his hometown of Kassel in Germany with his friend Michel, on whom he put the tiniest drop of pure Iso E Super, and within a few seconds of entering the bar, a woman approached him, so enamoured was she by his scent.

Geza Schoen: She shot right over to us and was so flirty – we thought there must be something magic in it!

Tim Blanks: Geza was very keen on making people reassess fragrance and stripping away the mystery, which is quite interesting because Iso E Super is the most mysterious fragrance. In the past I’ve used the word “arcane” to describe it because even though it’s intensely physical, it sort of played into chemical reactions that we aren’t close to understanding.

Susan Irvine: Once they realised they were onto something, Jeff introduced Geza to the designer Paul White, who was Tim’s best friend.

<sup>a</sup> Iso E Super is the trademarked name for 7-acetyl, 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8-octahydro-1,1,6,7-tetramethyl naphthalene, an *aroma chemical* developed in 1973 by International Flavors & Fragrances. Strictly speaking, Iso E Super is not a molecule but a complex mixture of isomers. The first perfume to use it was Halston Woman (1975), and it has since been a key ingredient in fragrances such as Christian Dior’s Fahrenheit (1988) and Terre d’Hermès (2006) by Hermès.

<sup>b</sup> Human olfactory receptors respond to molecules that have a mass under 350 grams per mole – the smaller the mass, the stronger the smell. Because Iso E Super, at 234.38 grams per mole, lies so close to the olfactory threshold, some people are unable to detect it.

<sup>c</sup> Iso E Super volatilises in response to heat from the skin, giving the impression that it disappears and reappears at intervals.



## The Package

Paul White, founder, Me Company: I’d never worked in the fragrance market. Me Company was mainly concerned with music packaging, working a lot with One Little Indian Records and Björk. Geza and Jeff’s brief was to create a whole visual narrative for the fragrance; we’d certainly never done anything like that before. How a lot of fragrance packaging typically seems to work is to come up with an image and then apply it to a product. But we smelled the perfume first.

Geza Schoen: We wanted to put the simplicity of the fragrance into the bottle and packaging design. We wanted to get away from the beige, hazy thing, or black and gold – ways that fragrance is traditionally packaged.

Paul White: We were looking mostly at the worlds of mathematics and science. That the fragrances would launch in pairs led us to binary code. The notion of something appearing and then disappearing, switching on and switching off – it was beautifully odd.

Geza Schoen: Binary code is the simplest form of communication, so the idea worked. The bottle design was intentionally simple: a container, merely a receptacle for the juice.

Tim Blanks: It was a stock bottle from the Italian glassware company Bormioli [Rocco]. There was a slight irregularity to it, which gave it a crafted feel.

Paul White: Geza was very keen not to do a cap.

Geza Schoen: Some products have outrageous caps, which are totally unnecessary. Think about it: a bottle which is closed by a spray pump that’s crimped to keep in the juice – the pump can’t be taken off unless the bottle is destroyed.

Paul White: That, of course, created a packaging problem: how do you carton up a pump-bottle perfume with no cap without causing any emissions?

Geza Schoen: You don’t need a cap. Most standard industry caps look terrible. And we certainly didn’t have the money to invest in one of our own.

Paul White: So we designed a fitment that could restrict the movement of the bottle in the box while preserving a space above the pump. We became so obsessed playing around with this strange project that we ended up with this little black box that you couldn’t really see on the shelves.

Geza Schoen: I had a little lab at my flat in Gospel Oak in north London, which I was sharing with a DJ friend. There was one room to house all his records and all of my bottles of ingredients and equipment, and zero space to fill and package the bottles of Escentric Molecules.

Linda Pilkington, founder and owner, Ormonde Jayne: I’d opened my first Ormonde Jayne perfumery on Old Bond Street in November 2002. Geza read about us so got in touch and introduced himself and his fragrance ideas. He didn’t have a licence for denatured alcohol<sup>d</sup>, though, which is essential for making a fragrance. I was happy to help out.

Susan Irvine: They couldn’t afford to get it made by some big manufacturer like IFF<sup>e</sup> so had a temporary fragrance factory at Paul’s studio in Kentish Town. Geza’s equipment was only small, so he would have to measure the ingredients out eight or nine times a night. It would be sloshing all over the floor.

Tim Blanks: It became this cottage industry. A real community spirit. We even filled bottles on the kitchen counter at home. I crimped the kids!

Paul White: At the same time, Jeff was taking Escentric Molecules around department stores like Selfridges and Harrods, and the feedback was that it was too conceptual – not what the market was looking for.

Tim Blanks: A few years earlier I’d met Daniela Rinaldi, the cosmetics queen of Harvey Nichols, at a Jimmy Choo dinner. We both got screaming drunk and had a fantastic time together talking perfume. She said



<sup>d</sup> Denatured alcohol is ethanol with chemicals added to make it unfit for human consumption. The denatured alcohol found in perfume and cosmetics often contains water and a bittering agent such as denatonium benzoate or denatonium saccharide.

<sup>e</sup> IFF, or International Flavors & Fragrances, is the world’s largest manufacturer of scents and flavourings, with annual sales revenues of \$3.08 billion. It has created fragrances for Chloé, Comme des Garçons and Mariah Carey, among many others.



to me that if there's ever anything I think she ought to know about then to call her. So I set up a meeting for Jeff and Escentric Molecules with her.

Daniela Rinaldi, controller of perfumery and concessions, Harvey Nichols, 1996–2009: I met Tim and Jeff, and to be honest, when they came to present the perfume, my immediate reaction was disappointment. Firstly, it was a stock bottle with no cap. Harvey Nichols sells haute perfumery, so we were used to super luxe, beautifully crafted bottles with etched glass caps. Caps were being engineered so that they had a soft click – you know, like with the doors on luxury cars? Also, the type on the packaging was too small. And, most importantly, Molecule 01 wasn't always smelled. How would my customers understand this? I *really* wanted to believe in it because the team behind it had real credibility.

Anna-Marie Solowij, beauty and health director, British *Vogue*, 2002–8: At the time, it was all about the big-brand fragrance houses, the blockbusters. Dolce & Gabbana's Light Blue was one of the biggest-selling fragrances then. Celebrity fragrances were big business: Paris Hilton, Britney Spears, Sarah Jessica Parker, among countless others, all released perfumes. Gourmand<sup>f</sup> fragrances like Calvin Klein's Euphoria or Nina Ricci's Nina... it was all quite fruity and sweet.

Susan Irvine: There was a vast wave of those fragrances. I think they were part of Western culture's junk food obsession. They were junk food for the nose.

Chandler Burr, perfume critic, *The New York Times*, 2006–10: By contrast, Escentric Molecules is a direct descendant of the minimalist school of Jean-Claude Ellena's Eau Parfumée au Thé Vert and Jacques Cavallier's L'Eau d'Issey, both masterpieces of the form.

Susan Irvine: There were far fewer niche fragrances on the market in the early 2000s, though there was an appetite growing for that sort of thing. Comme des Garçons' eponymous eau de parfum, L'Eau d'Issey by Issey Miyake and Bulgari's Eau

Parfumée au Thé Vert had shown that in the early 1990s. But the niche market as we understand it today was very, very small.

## Frenzy

Daniela Rinaldi: I left the office that night wearing Escentric 01, taking a black cab to Paddington station, and as I get out of the cab, the driver says to me, "You smell gorgeous, love. What is that?" On the train from Paddington to Reading, the very nice gentleman sitting next to me says the same thing. At Reading station, it happens *again*. We placed an order for 5,000 units of Escentric 01 and Molecule 01 with Jeff the following morning.

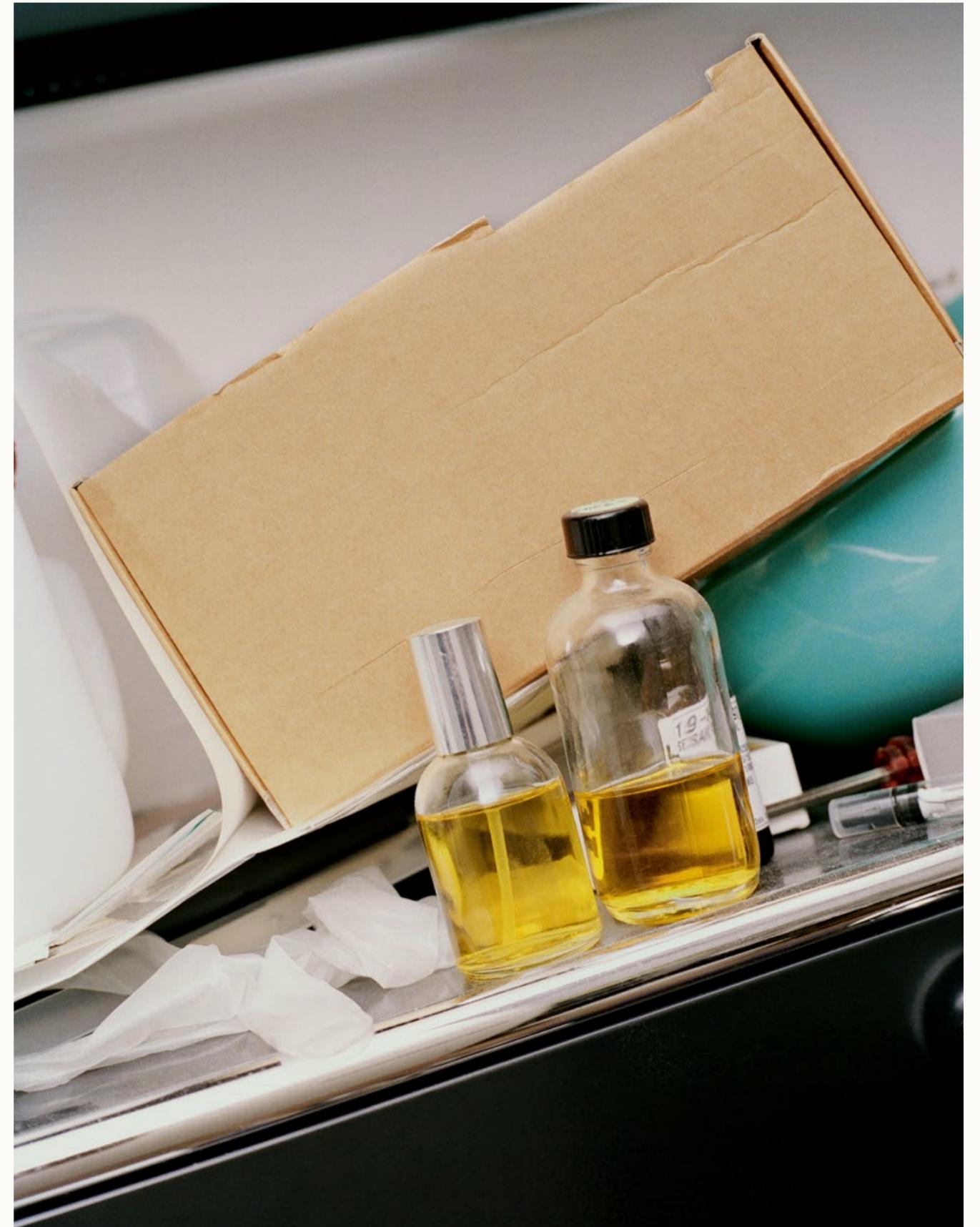
Geza Schoen: Tim was wearing the fragrance everywhere he went – fashion shows, parties, openings – sharing it with all his fabulous friends. And Tim pretty much knows *everybody*.

Tim Blanks: People were captivated by the fragrance. We gave a bottle to Chris Lowe from the Pet Shop Boys before it was launched at Harvey Nichols. He wore it out one night and told us he'd never been hit on so much in his life. There was a running joke about cab drivers: "I'm not gay, mate, but where's your aftershave from?"

Daniela Rinaldi: The launch toolkit that would normally be used for fragrance didn't apply. There was no print or outdoor advertising campaign, no splashy displays across the store windows. The fragrance market had become overcommodified and discount-driven, making it too accessible. Which in other categories isn't a bad thing – you want people to buy your product. But I don't want to smell like my 19-year-old daughter. So we decided to approach it subtly, a bit covert, like it was a club – you had to understand it to be in it. We'd grow market share by word of mouth. We had a private dinner in the restaurant at Harvey Nichols on 29 March 2006 to launch Escentric Molecules, and Jeff and Tim did the guest list.



<sup>f</sup> Gourmand is a category of perfumery that primarily features synthetic "edible" notes, such as honey, chocolate, vanilla and confectionery. A classic of the genre is Angel (1992) by Thierry Mugler.



Tim Blanks: We invited a bunch of our friends: Christopher Bailey, Janet Street-Porter, David Furnish... at one point Siouxsie Sioux, Lulu and Sharleen Spiteri were all chatting together, and I thought, Wow, there's a girl group. It was 2006!

Geza Schoen: It wasn't the worst way to launch a new fragrance.

Tim Blanks: The make-up artist Pat McGrath was around our house one day, en route to a barbecue at Naomi Campbell's. Pat was keen to smell this new perfume. After she left, about two hours later Naomi's driver shows up at our place. Naomi wanted a bottle.

Daniela Rinaldi: Steadily the buzz began to build. Then everything really changed when *Grazia*<sup>g</sup> picked it up.

Bibi Lynch, columnist, *Grazia*, 2005–present: *Grazia* commissioned me to road-test this new perfume which was supposed to make you more attractive to men and women. I thought, Oh God, what bullshit.

Tim Blanks: "The £59 fragrance that will get you a date," I think, was the headline.

Bibi Lynch: I was cynical about the whole thing until I tried it. And I loved that it smelled sexy, not unisex.

Paul White: The terminology we were using at the time was "gender-neutral". Geza didn't like "unisex".

Bibi Lynch: It was musky, slightly powdery, a bit earthy without being organic. Very sensual. I think I did become somewhat anosmic to it, though. The ironic thing about Escentric Molecules was, despite the claims about its powers of attraction, it wasn't surrounded by the sexualising or romantic messages that typically go with perfumes. The scent provoked a great reaction, for sure, but I did wonder if it's psychological: am I behaving differently because I think this perfume has special powers?

Geza Schoen: I didn't rate the whole "perfume that gets you laid" shtick, but you give a perfume to the press and what they make of it is out of your hands. It was a misunderstanding. In an earlier interview I'd said that Iso E Super has an almost pheromonic

effect. Those were my words; I wish I'd eaten them.

Tim Blanks: We were always careful about the pheromonic thing or saying anything that might make the perfume sound too gimmicky. We did hear later about a customer going into Harvey Nichols complaining that it didn't save their marriage. I mean, it's not therapy in a bottle.

Chandler Burr: Belief in pheromones is fallacious. The vomeronasal cavity<sup>h</sup> in humans is vestigial. It does not function. *Homo sapiens* females do not have oestrus, which is controlled by pheromones, but rather menstruation, in which pheromones play no role, and could not.

Geza Schoen: A recent study by Ruhr-Universität Bochum into the effects of scent involved testing Iso E Super on the vomeronasal cavity, and it seems as though Iso E Super does, in fact, trigger it.

Professor Hanns Hatt, chair, Department of Cell Physiology, Ruhr-Universität Bochum: We originally tested Hedione, one of the other ingredients in Escentric 01, on the human vomeronasal receptors and it activated one of them. We also did neurological studies on Hedione using MRT measurements and it activates a particular area of the hypothalamus which is closely connected to the release of sex hormones. Geza asked us to test Iso E Super, and it does stimulate a vomeronasal receptor in humans. We've since conducted behavioural experiments on Iso E Super but haven't published the results yet. But I can say that there are interesting effects of Iso E Super on human behaviour.

## Phenomenon

Daniela Rinaldi: The *Grazia* article just blew the audience out, though. People would be walking in with clippings because they didn't know what they were looking for.

Susan Irvine: Initially, the perfume was at the back of the Harvey

<sup>g</sup> The British edition of the Italian weekly women's magazine *Grazia* launched in February 2005 with a print run of 155,000. By August 2006, it had become the UK's bestselling women's magazine, with sales of 175,218 copies a week.

<sup>h</sup> The vomeronasal organ is a part of the olfactory system in many animals. Located at the base of the nasal cavity, it is mainly used to detect pheromones. Its functionality in humans has been debated. The organ is thought to regress during foetal development, and it is believed that only five of the receptors are still functional.



The atmosphere in Geza Schoen's laboratory in Kreuzberg, Berlin, is so heady that Mathilde Agius had to shoot these images in 15-minute bursts.

Nichols beauty hall and all the big-boy brands were at the front. Eventually, the queues for Escentric Molecules were so long that some of the bigger beauty brands turned their counters away from Escentric Molecules.

Geza Schoen: It took us all completely by surprise, and we struggled to keep up with the demand. We were using Linda's lab by this point, working there in the evenings when she wasn't.

Linda Pilkington: And as the months went by and the perfume was becoming more and more successful, the metal drums of Iso E Super got larger and larger and just kept arriving at the studio door.

Daniela Rinaldi: It got to a point where they couldn't produce enough.

Tim Blanks: Kate Moss called Harvey Nichols looking for a bottle. They were completely sold out. All they had was a half-full bottle in a drawer, and she took it! Kate was wearing it on a shoot with Mario Testino, and then he started wearing it.

Linda Pilkington: One day this enormous drum arrived which we couldn't even get in the door. I'm a five-foot lady, and we're talking about something that was half a tonne. We had to decant the contents into smaller drums using hand pumps. It was really hard work.

Tim Blanks: Harvey Nichols had a 600-person waiting list at one point. Brix began stocking it at Start in Shoreditch, and they were getting so many customers coming back with stories of the perfume's effects, she thought they should start keeping a book of them.

Brix Smith-Start, owner, Start, 2002–15: Customers were telling us that people were following them in the street to find out the perfume's name, or that their gay best friend tried to make out with them. It was nuts! We used to spray Escentric 01 around Start – you know the way you bake bread or cookies when you're trying to sell a house? And, oh my God, people would come in and say, "I could smell your store half a mile away from Old Street station."

Tim Blanks: In 2007, I was interviewing Amy Winehouse for *Interview* magazine in Denmark, and I brought her some bottles of Escentric Molecules. Then we read online that when her husband Blake Fielder-Civil was in jail she would spray the letters she sent him with Molecule 01. I really wanted to tell her that it doesn't work: Iso E Super can't be captured on paper.

Linda Pilkington: I finally had to tell Geza, "Listen, you're going to need to go into automation, because my lab can't handle this." We do everything by hand at Ormonde Jayne. So I introduced him to Broad Oak Toiletries in Tiverton, Devon, which, until 2016, did the filling for most of the brands you see on the shelves in England.

Tim Blanks: It had been on sale in the UK for a few months. Then we started talking to Sarah at Colette in Paris, Julie Gilhart at Barney's in New York... Sarah Coonan moved from Harvey Nichols to Liberty, so they started stocking it – it's still one of its bestselling perfumes today. These are benchmark businesses that the rest of the world scopes out to see what they're carrying. That's when the Russian and Middle Eastern buyers got hooked into it. Jeff and I would go into the stores and do training sessions with the staff.

Vladimir Davidi, owner of Esterk Lux Parfum distributors: We were looking for new perfumes to launch in Russia. Perfume is a real luxury here, and for a fragrance to sell, it needs to be expensive, exclusive or unusual. Niche perfumery was practically nonexistent, so we marketed Escentric Molecules aggressively, stocking it in the four biggest department stores in Russia. And surely the pheromone effect helped too! Ten years later, it's still one of the top five bestselling perfumes in Russia.

## Lastingness

Daniela Rinaldi: I've worn Escentric 01 every day for the last 10 years. Escentric Molecules was game-changing. It was the biggest fragrance launch

Harvey Nichols has ever had. I think Escentric Molecules did for fragrance what MAC did for cosmetics when we first launched it in the UK in 1993. They showed that beauty brands could dare to be different. More importantly, it was a wake-up call for the fragrance industry. It brought it back to the product – the juice.

Anna-Marie Solowij: Perfume is a numbers game. But this wasn't about big numbers or reach. It was about getting the right people fascinated by the chemistry and the story behind it, as opposed to roses or a girl on a beach. There were no definable demographics. There was no age limit. There was never any imagery to represent the brand, so it wasn't pinned on a specific look, lifestyle or person. I'd bet that most people still don't know who makes Escentric Molecules – it was almost like Martin Margiela in that sense. Escentric Molecules also tapped into that independent, entrepreneurial start-up culture that was percolating at the time. And even as it grew, it never lost its sense of individual ownership. Everyone who wore it felt it was their scent. All the marketing in the world won't buy that.

Susan Irvine: People loved the purity of the idea. It was utterly modernist and fitted in with that Japanese aesthetical idea that you reveal something's beauty by taking away the extraneous. It felt like perfumes went from being a Jeff Koons to a Malevich.

Tim Blanks: It was an anomaly – a marginal notion that unhinged the mainstream. It was entirely authentic, with nothing deliberate about it. It happened because of this coalescence of people who all could bring something unique to the table.

Geza Schoen: It was an idea that had been lying around for decades. We took our own approach to this niche world with a concept that was unique. But anyone could have done it. We just happened to be the ones.