

LUCCA

In Florence to discover the oldest Italian "Officina" of Perfumes

In Florence, in Via della Scala, at number 16, there is a place where, upon entering, one is enveloped by a magical atmosphere comprised of extremely delicate aromas, intriguing perfumes, cruets full of colored liquids, bottles holding crystalline contents, vases brimming with herbs and flower petals, boxes, soaps and bottles of elixirs bearing antique names. Today, a perfect synthesis of Renaissance tradition and entrepreneurial initiative.

Lucia Maffei

A place where we can smell the silence, the history of Italian Renaissance and the invisible beauty of the purest part of precious materials: perfume. A place where, without realizing it, we find ourselves whispering. We have just entered the Officina Farmaceutica-Profumo di Santa Maria Novella. If, according to popular opinion, perfume was born in France around the mid-16th century, in truth maybe not many people know that it actually arrived in Paris from Florence. It was Catherine De' Medici, daughter of Lorenzo il Magnifico, who, upon her marriage to Henry of Valois, Duke of Orléans in 1533, brought with her Renato Bianco, incomparable chemist, perfumer and alchemist, who in a very short time became the Perfumer for all of the French nobility. "René le Florentin", as the French immediately christened him, had learned the art and secrets of herbs in Florence, at the Officina Medicamentaria of the Dominican convent of Santa Maria Novella, and he was actually the first person to begin growing flowers and plants around Grasse, a small town in the South of Provence, today world-renowned for its fragrances.

THE OFFICINA FARMACEUTICA OF FLORENCE IS THE MOST ANTIQUE PHARMACY IN ALL OF EUROPE. The first documents telling how, in their gardens, the friars grew the officinal herbs that were used to prepare medications, balsams and creams, date back to 1221. It was 1612 when Friar Angiolo Marchissi opened a "sales point" inside the Pharmacy's cloister for the sale of different medicinal preparations. From that moment, the activity of Santa Maria Novella has never ceased. "And to usher in the celebrations for these four centuries of uninterrupted activity," says Eng. Eugenio Alphantery, Partner and Managing Director of the Officina, "I have personally created two very special perfumes, contained in bottles that are just as precious and exclusive. The Ottone and Porcellana essences. Numbered bottles that will remain on sale only until the date of our Quadricentennial, December 21, 2012. It was a bit like returning to those countries that have known and appreciated the Officina since the 18th century: Ottone brings us back to northern Europe, to Germany, to Russia, while Porcellana recalls the Far East, where this material was discovered and created and whose tradition so fascinated the Medici family."

The arrival in Via della Scala, about 22 years ago, of Eugenio Alphantery – to whom the two Stefani sisters, heiresses of Friar Marchissi, entrusted the company – has given rise to a new season of successes for the antique Officina: for almost four hundred years its exclusive products could be purchased only in Florence, in the antique Dominican convent. Today, Santa Maria Novella is a luxury brand of beauty care renowned the world over, from Brazil to Japan, from the United States to Europe.

"VISITING OUR LABORATORY AND THE FACILITIES IS A BIT LIKE SEEING SIX DIFFERENT ARTISAN SHOPS ALL IN ONE. Although today production has been transferred from the ancient convent to a modern facility, all our products are still made not only in respect of the original recipes, but also of the artisan traditions of the Dominican friars. We use only raw material produced and selected with extreme care, and all the processes – from the creation of pot-pourri to perfumes, from creams to soaps, from elixirs up to the candles and herbalist products – continue to be performed in the wake of that tradition that has characterized us for centuries and that makes our products so different and inimitable."

"MY MOST IMPORTANT TASK" – CONTINUES EUGENIO ALPHANDERY – "HAS ALWAYS BEEN TO INTEGRATE AND

ENSURE THE COEXISTENCE OF BRAND GROWTH, NEW PRODUCTS, AND THE DEMANDS OF THE DIFFERENT MARKETS where we are present, in absolute respect for history, keeping the artisan tradition of all production and processes intact. And it is for this reason that I have personally studied, designed and manufactured many of the machines present in our laboratories, adapting them to the requirements of quality and uniqueness demanded by the name and the history of the Officina Farmaceutica.

If, on the one hand, we continue to grow the most ancient and rarest herbs directly on the hills surrounding Florence – herbs such as Balsamine, also called Erba Santa Maria Novella – on the other, thanks to research and to extremely modern technologies, we propose vanguard products to the market. We have recently created an innovative veterinary line for the care and beauty of dogs and cats. With a very different target in mind, we are presently launching in the USA a special line aimed at aesthetic surgery that will be used exclusively by doctors in specialized clinics.”

And perhaps it is just this perfect synthesis of past and history indissolubly mixed with the present, that create – like in the case of a perfume – that magic and charm that make every bottle produced in this Antique Florentine Pharmacy unique. •

Lucca is one of the first cities to feature an “Angolo di Santa Maria Novella” corner. In this exquisite little shop-salon, Simonetta Pardini, scholar and expert in the history of perfumes, has created “Le Bar à Parfum” where, through an intriguing “menu” of olfactory choices, one can try aromas, flowers, rare elixirs and essences.

Shop and Museum: Via della Scala, 16 - 50123 Florence.

The production facilities and the shop in Via della Scala, can be visited free of charge through appointment.

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