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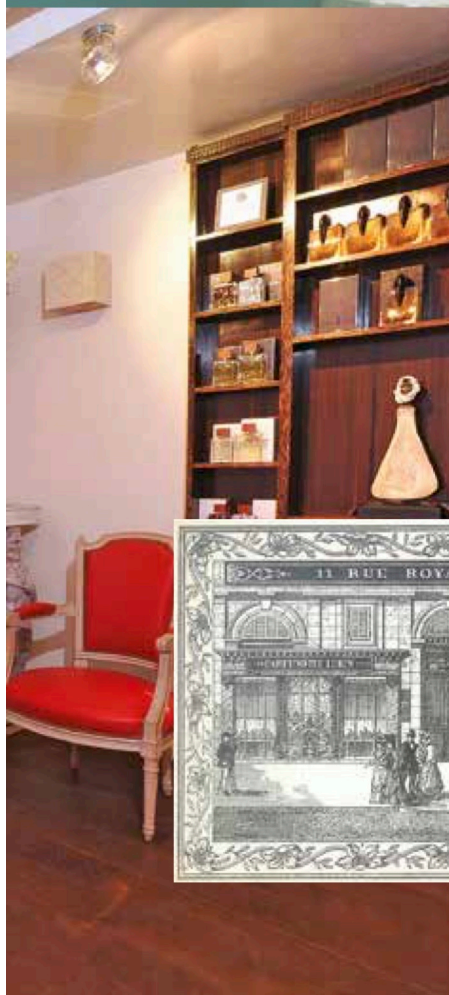
# Reviving a luxury brand

In a market flooded with hundreds of new fragrance launches each year, the owner of Lubin – one of the industry's oldest companies – is on a quest to restore the firm to its former brilliance.

WORDS • MICHELLE BATEMAN

In a small side street in Paris's 1st arrondissement, just a short stroll from the city's historic Halles market, is the headquarters of Lubin, one of the oldest perfume brands in the world. The building itself is sufficiently ancient that the company's founder, Pierre-François Lubin, was able to start his perfume-making apprenticeship there in 1784, at the ripe old age of 10, with the official perfumer to Queen Marie Antoinette.





1. Gilles Thevenin, and (inset) brand founder, Pierre-François Lubin.
2. Thevenin started collecting Lubin bottles and perfume artefacts when he knew he could acquire the brand.
3. Black Jade: the re-imagined perfume that Marie Antoinette wore.
4. Parfums Lubin on Rue des Canettes in Paris.
5. The original boutique in 1897.



That the company should make this building its 21st-century base is the kind of detail that seems improbable until you meet the brand's charming current owner Gilles Thevenin, a man whose passion for perfume is rivalled only by his fascination for history. The office doubles as an archive for Lubin's 220-year history, with cabinets crammed with old perfume formulas, order books, intricately shaped bottles and rare artefacts, such as a spoon used to pour perfumed oil in a prehistoric Turkish temple.

"I started purchasing them 15 years ago," Thevenin explains. "As soon as I realised I would have to have my own historical brand. When I understood that Lubin was possible – that it was not impossible to get the oldest and the most interesting brand in the perfume industry – I started buying antique bottles."

This was around the turn of this century, and Thevenin had spent the previous dozen or so years as a senior executive for storied perfume houses such as Guerlain and Rochas. His desire to have his own brand was, he says, "the logical outcome of a successful career in the industry. Of course, more and more people in management positions nowadays prefer to switch from one field to another because they want to climb the corporate ladder faster. But if you love your specialty, you stick to it and, one day, you will be able to express yourself with a brand of your own."

## DEFINING THE SPIRIT

Wanting to express himself was one thing, actually getting his hands on the house of Lubin, then owned by the German haircare giant Wella, was quite another. He had enthusiasm on his side, however – "other people were fighting for it but not with enough strength and energy and passion" – and after finalising the deal in 2004, he set about reviving a house that had been virtually dormant for years and had been dismissed as "dusty and outdated" by its former owners.

Today, Lubin has a dozen employees, a standalone boutique in the fashionable Saint Germain des Pres quarter of Paris and broad distribution globally.

Its revival has certainly benefited from a shift among perfume aficionados towards niche or little-known scents, rather than the big-name blockbusters that dominated the scene during the late 1990s and early 2000s. But it has also been spearheaded by Thevenin's vision of making Lubin relevant for the 21st century while staying true to the brand values of sincerity, respect and discretion. These might sound like lofty goals for a perfume company but, as Thevenin says, "if you forget your values, you are no longer what you're supposed to be. I want to show that even if you only produce perfume – which is not a serious enterprise – you have to do it seriously, with high standards and in the proper spirit."

He understood that to continue to be relevant, Lubin couldn't afford to be stuck in history, resting on its laurels of »

past successes like Gin Fizz. At the same time, Thevenin wasn't interested in creating a "fashionable" brand because "this would be a marketing policy, and I don't like the idea of creating according to 'the market'". Instead, he trod a third path, being guided by the "spirit" of the house, but adjusting the brand for contemporary tastes, with the help of some of the best perfume noses in the business.

When he happened upon the recipe for Queen Marie Antoinette's personal fragrance, for example, he decided against recreating it exactly (keeping in mind also that some of the original ingredients are no longer legally available). "Instead of trying to copy, and making a bad copy, we prefer to improve and modernise it but keep the same spirit." The result – called Black Jade, because 'Marie Antoinette' would be too boring – "is the legitimate heir to the original formula ... Perfume is not only a formula, it's also the spirit of the formula, its soul, so to speak."

The spirit of Lubin, Thevenin believes, is similar to that of French culture in general, in that it looks for inspiration all over the world and then adapts it with a French touch. This year's newest scent is called Les Princesses de Malabar and is "inspired by a legendary civilisation in India, where the rulers were women". The spirit is equally informed by "curiosity, creativity and quality, and is the reverse of what we see today, which is this stupid showmanship and fake glamour".

This discretion, confidence and – yes – a little elitism is to be expected from a brand that grew out of an affiliation with royalty and spent the early part of the 20th century as a 'parfumeur des châteaux', one of the preferred vendors to French aristocratic family homes in the countryside ("It was snobby, it was old fashioned, a supplier to the kings and queens, but it was affordable."). Lubin's customers these days might not be royalty, but they still appreciate the same quiet luxury. "Because there is a strong history, there is no reason for boasting or showing off, people will recognise themselves in the brand – the right people. Others might say, 'Oh, it's not glamorous or famous enough'; they can go somewhere else, that's okay with me."

## MEETING THE FAMILY

Being true to the spirit of Lubin has not only directed the company's creative path, it's also had a hand in shaping the financial side of the business. Maintaining a historic perfume house takes significant resources and so shareholders were sought, four of whom have a long family association with Lubin. After the founder Pierre-François Lubin went into retirement in 1843, he sold the house to his apprentice Felix Prot, and it's Prot's descendants who are now key investors. "This is exciting," says Thevenin, "because they have a very special relationship with the brand, which has been part of their family legend since



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6. The house of Lubin's display of perfume bottles.

7. Original advertising from the 1800s.

8. Thevenin worked with Jean-Paul Guerlain prior to revive the house of Lubin.



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1844." But he admits this comes with certain challenges. "You get comments like 'I am not sure if my father would have done it this way'." But this is where that house spirit comes in. "I am more knowledgeable about Lubin than most of the others now, at least about its culture and history, so it is quite challenging for everyone. We have heated debates sometimes."

Negotiating with shareholders might be testing at times but, for Thevenin, it's still vastly preferable to going down the path of so many other niche brands and selling to a multinational. "It's a very active market. But I still have a lot of things to do with Lubin, and I don't open my door to anyone. I feel a bit like a father of olden times, with a daughter of a marriageable age, who has to vet her suitors. I feel my daughter is far too young to fall into the hands of a stranger." ■