

FRAGRANCE AND PERSONAL CARE

Meet the local Chinese fragrance brands preparing to go global

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Three Chinese fragrance labels Documents, To Summer and Melt Season are ready to enter the international market. Photo: Melt Season

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As Lane Crawford China's head of beauty, I have been fortunate enough to have access to many beauty and fragrance brands' founders and watch the step-by-step development of their companies from financing, to building awareness, to deploying online and offline channels.

Speaking with insiders who have been in the industry for decades, the rapid development of the [niche and Chinese fragrance markets](#) has been extraordinary.

There is a promising future for local labels, with the possibility of breaking into overseas boutique department stores and multi-brand shops within the next three years.

Given that fragrances have started reflecting customers' lifestyles, players in this category are distinguished by creativity, aesthetics and cultural literacy.

[Documents](#), [To Summer](#) and Melt Season are three of the most promising homegrown fragrance outfits in terms of financing and cohesiveness of product development.

These three brands not only focus on online channels, but have doubled down on offline expansion by opening standalone flagships. Their branding emphasizes Chinese identity, tapping the Guochao trend and domestic cultures.

Documents, known for its signature Parfum, opened its first flagship store "Night Temple" on Shanghai's Huaihai Middle Road in July 2021.

Though it debuted as a top Chinese perfume line, Documents did not focus on Tmall. Instead, it pursued the approach of leading international groups: by leveraging bricks-to-mortar shops as the axis of development and expanding its footprint to Shanghai Kerry Center and Beijing SKP-S. It then launched on Net-A-Porter this July.

The overall Documents strategy shows integrity. With architecture-inspired creative designs, avant-garde product shoots and world-famous perfumers, the brand portfolio outshines many international houses.

Given this, Documents is bound to go abroad. Indeed, it is already expected to launch in prestigious department stores in Europe and North America. The business seems to have done all the "right" things.

Beijing-based To Summer is another emerging fragrance label. Its products are usually low in stock or sell out immediately, due to a special condition: releases are only dropped at 8 p.m. every Thursday night, and as very limited editions.

To Summer maintains that this condition complies with its brand ethos of "serving customers within our capability" a commitment to product quality and the consumer experience.

In 2020, the venture's first experiential store, "To Summer Living Room," was opened in Taikoo Li Sanlitun, Beijing. A Shanghai flagship followed last year, and there has recently been an opening of a new door in Beijing Guozijian.

All To Summer store designs show a brand image rooted in Chinese culture.

To Summer was also the first local fragrance make I tried after its popup in Lane Crawford Beijing yielded impressive sales results.

I snapped up a shower gel on the firm's WeChat Mini Program and while the smell resonated, it did not layer or endure long enough for me. But if the design and packaging of its products can be improved, perhaps it will reach new heights.

The last of these domestic disruptors is Melt Season.

The label has two series of perfumes, namely the high-end, at \$180 (1280 RMB) per 100ml, and the classic collection, at \$135 (980 RMB).

Despite the recent emergence of these homegrown companies, most of them are priced within the mass consumer range under \$140 (1,000 RMB). Melt Season, however, is closer to the international high-end market.

"Our brand's high-end position reflects its pricing, but also its product development," said founder Ni Lishi.

To prevent counterfeit products appearing in the future, the brand has splashed out on the perfume containers, inviting recognized perfumers including Aurelien Guichard (founder of Metier Premiere) and Francis Kurkdjian (founder of Maison Francis Kurkdjian), all of which indicates its ambition for global expansion.

Similar to Documents and To Summer, Melt Season has attached great importance to the establishment of an offline presence.

The first Melt Season physical store opened at a single-family, garden-style house in Shanghai this August. Alongside domestic expansion, the line's overseas business will also be officially launched later this year.

Paris, New York, Tokyo and other top-tier international metropolises are among the group's first choices.

The mainland label has a strategy that aligns with international leading establishments. Still, it seems to have an unattainable coldness, lacking healing warmth, in my opinion. It looks like an exquisite sample house, but nothing feels like home.

The founders of China's homegrown concerns often share extensive similarities: cross-cultural life experience, sophisticated aesthetics and professional backgrounds in design as well as the fact that many are choosing to collaborate with internationally recognized manufacturers or invite renowned perfumers as an endorsement.

Fragrances can spark imagination and memory. They can also transcend cultural boundaries, which is good news for Chinese fragrance brands wanting to go abroad.

Among these local Chinese disruptors, which will be the first to make the foray into overseas markets?

This is an op-ed article that reflects the views of the author and does not necessarily represent the views of Jing Daily.

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