

FRAGRANCE TASMANIA

Perfume world goes wild for Aussie flower

A Tasmanian producer is creating a complex scent base from the humble brown boronia, writes Stephen Clark

To open a bottle of Goldfield & Banks' perfume Southern Bloom in a closed car, as I did, is to be overwhelmed by rich oriental tones – an intoxicating, even extraordinary floral sensation, but with woody depths that come as a second wave. Jasmine, sandalwood, ylang-ylang and a touch of coconut all swirl around a centre piece scent unique to Australia: the humble brown boronia.

It's known as a somewhat fussy plant, hard to grow, and with a limited flowering season – just three to four weeks in late winter. It's hard to imagine gathering enough tiny brown-red flower cups to squeeze out a thimbleful of fragrance, let alone a bottle.

But that's exactly what a small concern in Tasmania has been doing.

Apart from the crunch of boots on gravel and a cow playing King of the Hill over the fence, all is quiet in the Hobart spring sunshine at Essential Oils of Tasmania's headquarters. The only hint that this is no ordinary farm is the pungent aroma of sweet peppermint emanating from the tallest shed.

Like a scene from a kinder, gentler *Breaking Bad*, white-coated Phil Causon, production manager at Essential Oils of Tasmania (EOT), is feeding a machine that resembles a cement mixer crossed with a whisky still. Instead of meth, Causon is cooking flowers.

For 35 years, EOT has been an under-the-radar success story in the billion-dollar global trade in essential oils. Tucked away at the bottom of the world, Tasmania's abundant water, long summer days and cold nights are perfect for growing a variety of produce from lavender to grapes. Genetically modified crops have been banned since 2014.

Essential oils find their way into food, fragrance and aromatherapy products. Toothpaste and oral hygiene require hundreds of thousands of kilos of peppermint essence; fennel oil gives pastis its aniseed flavour; and parsley oil is a common ingredient in gut care and complementary medicines.

Just as with wine, an oil's provenance, or traceability, is an important component. EOT can tell you just which paddock a barrel comes from, if not the position of the sun when it was harvested and the name of the farmer's dog.

EOT has a long association with brown boronia. Despite being native to Western Australia, it grows surprisingly well in Tasmania. EOT has worked with the University of Tasmania's agriculture and plant sciences faculty for more than 10 years to extend the yield and consistency of its boronia cultivars, which are grown chiefly in the north and east of the state.

Back in the shed, Causon warns me not to get too close and to turn off electronic devices lest they set off a chemical reaction. "You don't just grab some plants out of the bush and hope for the best," says Causon. "This is the result of 30 years of development – students have done PhDs on this stuff." Over that time, Causon has "planted it, pruned it, collected it, extracted it", he says.



You don't just grab plants out of the bush and hope for the best.

Philip Causon

Essential Oils of Tasmania

Boronia's fragrance is carried in the plant's mesophyll. Solvent washes are used to isolate the scent, first into a waxy substance known as a "concrete" and then refined into a sticky tar-like concentrate or "absolute". Boronia absolute is one of the most expensive perfume bases in the world – worth about \$US10,000 (\$14,000) a kilo. And at \$US100 a gram, "that's not going to sell at Salamanca Market", says Causon.

When Goldfield & Banks founder Dimitri Weber steps forward to dip a paper stick into the beaker of dark gold boronia absolute, he inhales an earthy aroma very different to the sweetness of boronia flowers. "I can smell tea. And grass. Flowers,

of course, but blackcurrant and moss as well," he says.

Its mutability is part of boronia's unique botanical profile, with a broader range of characteristics than other high-value absolutes like rose or jasmine possess. In the 70s it contributed citrus tartness to Coca-Cola's Mello Yello soft drink, and it's been used to flavour tobacco. Boronia was responsible for the fresh sweetness in Dior's Diorissimo Eau de Toilette way back in 1956 and Ralph by Ralph Lauren had fruity boronia at its heart.

Saskia Havekes was a florist for many years before branching out with Grandiflora fragrances eight years ago. While she adores the fragrance in bouquets, not many customers like the look. "Well, it's brown, for a start, and it hangs down. It's not a big, glamorous flower," she says.

It was a conversation with Bertrand Duchaufour, the French "nose" she had worked with on her Queen of the Night eau de parfum, that prompted memories of the wildflower she knew as a child in Sydney's Kenhurst.

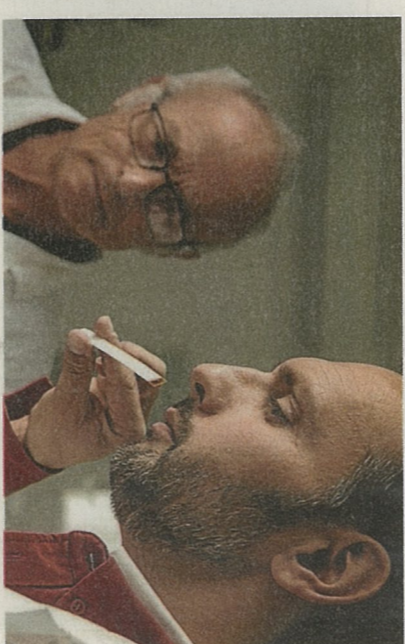
"He said, 'Do you know anything about this little flower?'" says Havekes. "Then in Paris another perfumer asked me about it. I thought, gosh, that's the last flower I expected to be talking about. They are all amazed that it's so tiny but packs such a punch."

Havekes got in touch with EOT ("they have an amazing reputation," she says) and sent on a vial of absolute to Duchaufour. "It's not a soiflore, a copy of the scent," she says of Grandiflora Boronia, which was launched last year. "It's more of an interpretation. It's not a heady floral, it has a sweet whisky tone and it's a little herbaceous. You can smell the raw plant material in it."

Another Australian product using EOT



Main: Perfumer Dimitri Weber of Goldfield & Banks with canisters of essential oils in cold storage. From above: Fields of boronia; a rotary evaporator distills boronia oil; Weber and Philip Causon check the scent of the absolute. PHOTOS: CHRIS CREER, AMY BROWN



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Need to know

Southern Bloom For stockists please call 1800 940 578 or go to genzsa.com.au. Limited production 100ml, \$249.

Grandiflora Boronia 50ml bottle, \$145. See grandiflorafragrance.com for stockists

Tasmania 1 Candle \$69. Available at the-raconteur.com



absolute is The Raconteur range of Australian scented candles. Its Tasmania 1 combines extract of brown boronia with lemon myrtle and native sassifras.

In the lab we watch as boronia leaves, stems and flowers are steeped in solvent and agitated for hours, to achieve the exact right mix of notes. "I am trying to achieve the smell you get when you are standing 400 metres downwind of a paddock of boronia in full bloom," says Causon. "It's the bees' knees."

Weber and Causon are testing different absolutes, absorbed in conversation about cultivars and harvests. "This is the best part of my job," says Weber, smiling.

Boronia is also Causon's favourite oil in the shed. "Peppermint and lavender are singular smells, you know what they smell like. Boronia is much more complex. The initial impact is floral, but as it dries off you get these spicy, green and woody notes. It also takes a lot longer – three to four days as opposed to under an hour for lavender, and from five tonnes you get just two or three kilos at the end."

The other part is taking Australian native perfumes to the world. Goldfield & Banks is now selling in top retail environments such as Harvey Nichols in London and Barneys New York (though sadly not in an Australian department store). It's been a rapid trajectory for Weber, who migrated from Belgium and began his brand only two years ago.

The story of Southern Bloom's journey from Tasmania's hillsides to the world's perfume shelves is a reminder of the qualities that the rest of the world admires about Australia: purity and rarity, both of which they are willing to pay for. **✉**

The writer flew to Tasmania courtesy of Escentials Brands.



Boronia plants ready to harvest; dried flowers are sorted by production manager Phil Causon.