

How Sweet It Is!

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If your idea of shopping for a new perfume involves heading over to the nearest mall and dousing yourself with 12 or 15 of the celebrity-promoted varieties arrayed on some cosmetics counter, it's time to consider a new approach. You just might be ready for a visit to the Perfume Shop, where owner Knud Tinglev-Hansen thinks there's more to choosing a fragrance than picking Mikhail Baryshnikov over Elizabeth Taylor.

The counters of this small Walnut Grove store are nearly bare, and you won't be drowned in clouds of Giorgio. Instead, Tinglev-Hansen will bring out a few bottles at a time and offer samples of them on cotton balls. He'll be happy to explain why dab-on bottles are better than sprays (less waste) and why natural ingredients are less likely than synthetics to give you a

headache. And the next time you come in he'll probably even remember what scent you liked.

The Danish-born Tinglev-Hansen, who bought the Perfume Shop in 1972, thinks of his 5,000 customers as people who "dare to be different." They're not seduced by celebrity promotions and they're tired of the high turnover favored by bigger stores. In fact, many first-time shoppers come in because a favorite scent is no longer carried by department stores, and about half his stock is unavailable anywhere else in the area.

He claims to recall almost everything he's stocked—"I have it in my nose"—but admits that customers are "intimidated by their own lack of knowledge." So he spends much of his time introducing people to perfumes they haven't tried before, searching his extensive European contacts for an old or obscure scent, and making detailed notes on customers' purchases and preferences. Looking for Givenchy's hard-to-find "L'Interdit"? Tinglev-Hansen will let you know when he finds it. Do you still have fond memories of "Evening in Paris," which hasn't



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been available for 20 years? He can probably find you something you'll like just as well.

And while the most expensive item in the store is Jean Patou's "1000" perfume (\$115 a quarter-ounce), you don't have to be rich to

benefit from his expertise. Among the store's least expensive items is an \$18 spray bottle of Robert Piquet's "Fracas" eau de toilette, and the majority of sales are in the \$25 to \$60 range.

At one time the Perfume Shop, a Madison institution since 1939, had five locations, but in the mid-'80s Tinglev-Hansen consolidated into one store, and in 1989 he finally closed his Pinckney Street shop and moved to the west side. Today he does all the buying and selling himself and relies almost entirely on word-of-mouth to promote the store. But that word has spread around the country: A solid mail-order business helps keep the Perfume Shop stable even when local sales are down, and in 1990, he shipped about 2,000 boxes to customers as far away as Hawaii.

In fact, Tinglev-Hansen thinks perfume is practically recession-proof. As prices go up, more customers treat it as a luxury to be reserved for special occasions, but they never really stop buying. "There are certain things that people will always allow themselves," he says, "and fragrances seem to be one of them." ■