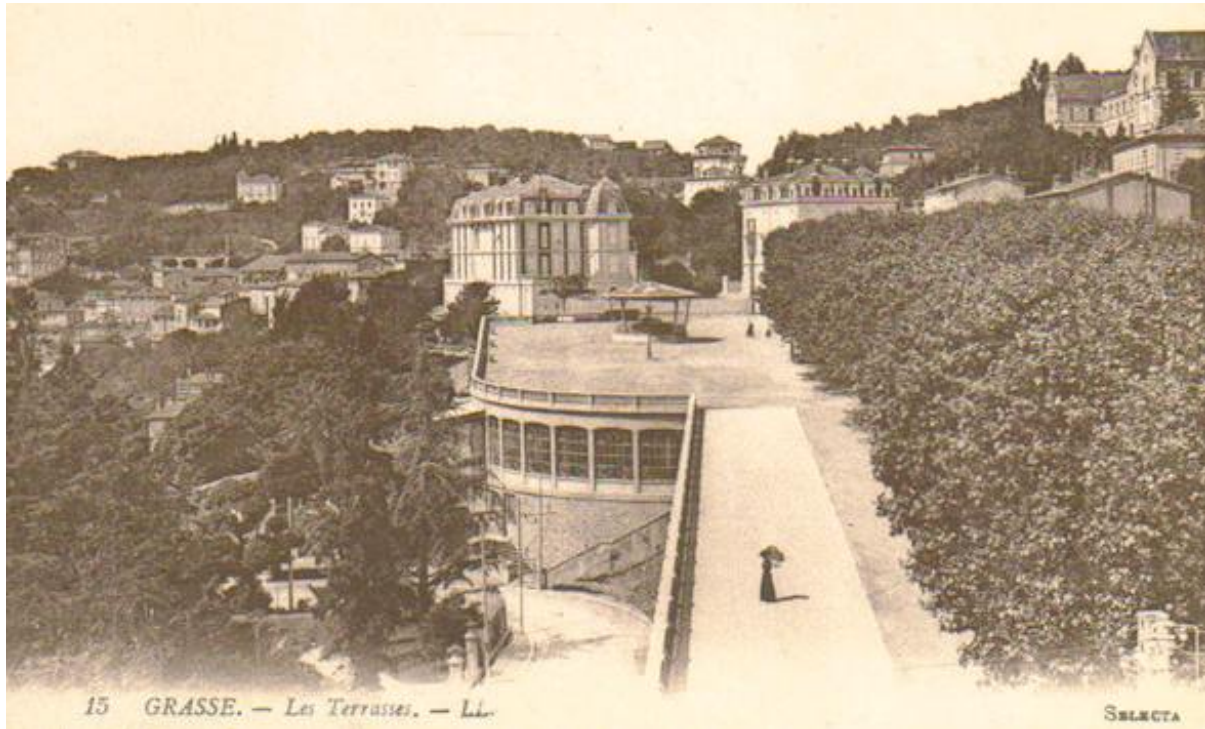


Bonjour Paris - Yves de Chiris: Scented Heir to Chiris French Perfume Dynasty

By [Sue Aran](#)



Grasse, about 1900. Vintage French post card.

Tucked off a road behind a tall laurel hedge and surrounded by sunflower fields in July, **Yves de Chiris** enjoys a life enhanced with richly textured memories. Born in 1937, Yves is the epitome of style: immensely affable, cultivated, erudite and *debonair*. He was educated in French *lycées* and English prep schools. Yves is the fifth generation of the Chiris dynasty that began with his great-great-grandfather, **Antoine Chiris**, in 1768.

I had no idea whom we were going to meet that sunny summer's day. I'd heard anecdotally the story of my husband's family's visit many years ago to a perfume factory in **Grasse**, and about the young perfumer there who had dated his sister a few years before. Now, I was seated at an umbrella-shaded table in the courtyard of a stone farmhouse in the tiny village of **Endoufielle**, across from one of the most charming men I'd ever met, being served pink *Champagne* and sumptuous *hors d'oeuvres*. Over a lunch that lasted more than four hours my husband and I were regaled with stories of a family empire that stretched from the shores of the **Mediterranean** to the distant reaches of **China**, and would remain the preeminent force in the perfume industry for more than two centuries.

Antoine Chiris grew up in the *Provençal* village of Grasse, surrounded by the scents of rose, mimosa, violet, tuberose, orange blossom and jasmine. The mild climate of the region spurred the economic development of perfumery into a flourishing industry. At the beginning of the 18th century, Antoine was sent to Paris by his father to open a shop. While other merchants sold a little bit of everything from *charcuterie* to chocolates, Antoine had the foresight to sell only perfume. He frequented Parisian society and became part of the *entourage* of **Louis XV**. By chance he was introduced to the directors of France's equivalent of **The East India Trading Company**, *La Compagnie des Indes*. His imagination was sparked by conversations of exotic spices and essences that were being gathered in distant lands and with shrewd business acumen, Antoine

realized their potential market.



Antique Chiris parfum bottles in traveling case, circa 1885.

Returning to Grasse shortly thereafter, he commissioned the manufacture of 10 stills, each one 12 times the standard size, and bought all of the flower production from the surrounding countryside. He created the **Antoine Chiris Company**, and overnight became the major fragrance supplier to all the courts and court perfumers of Europe. By the end of the 19th century, the Chiris family owned between 600 and 800 hectares of flower plantations in and around Grasse.

With an eye to the future, Antoine and his son, **Anselme**, traveled the world continuously in search of raw materials that were more exotic and intense in odor and taste than the current fashion. Eventually, they decided it was no longer efficient to buy essential oils from distant lands, and began developing their own flower plantations all over the world. Tired of a lifetime of travel, Anselme passed the family business to his son, **Léon**. After he became Senator of the *Alpes-Maritimes*, he further solidified the future direction of the company by building an extraordinary network of relationships with German, American, English and French companies. He hosted **Queen Victoria** at his villa and became friends with **Sadi Carnot**, future President of the French Republic. The children of the Chiris and Carnot families intermarried and they participated in all of the French colonial expansions of the time—**Algeria, Central Africa, the Congo, the Comoro Archipelago, Madagascar and Indochina.**



Queen Victoria visits Grasse in 1891. Vintage French post card.

What made the Chiris colonial dynasty uniquely different were their radical socialist attitudes. They redistributed part of their earnings to the countries where they were doing business, and focused on social programs. They installed electricity, built businesses, schools, houses and hospitals. Under their guidance, doctors and nurses treated people for free and salaries were paid to pregnant women. Retirement homes were created for their workers and, in fact, **The Antoine Chiris Company** opened the first retirement home for old pensioners in Grasse. "There is a wonderful statue of my great-grandfather in Grasse, of which I am very proud," Yves said. "It's a bronze bust set on a pillar and next to it is an old peasant woman. She is holding a little girl by the hand and pointing at the bust. I believe it shows the appreciation of the people of Grasse for what he did."

Many historic events conspired around this time to further ensure the company's viability. The Industrial Revolution created profound changes in the perfume industry, among them the invention of the process of reproducing natural scents in the form of aroma chemicals. Showing business savvy once again, the Chiris Company bought the patents for this invention which allowed them to treat a far greater quantity of flowers for less money. Single-handedly, the company democratized the perfume industry. Up to this point in time, perfume was reserved exclusively for the aristocracy; now it could be purchased by anyone. "Contemporary perfume would not exist without aroma chemicals," Yves explained to us. "If we had to use nature's products for everything that we perfume today, we would have defoliated the planet years ago. Violets, for example, have to be harvested by hand. Over a million blossoms are needed to make one ounce of pure perfume!"

At the beginning of the 20th century, Yves' grandfather, **George**, who inherited the company from his father Léon, was introduced to a Corsican man who wanted to become a perfumer. His name was **François Coty**. Coty became a trainee at the Chiris factory in Grasse. He and George became fast friends and in 1904, George gave Coty seed money to start his own business, introducing him to Paris aristocracy and the burgeoning American market. "Coty," as Yves described him, "was an autodidact who had a nose that revolutionized the perfume industry in yet another way. He had a little success selling scents to barbershops and department stores, but at the *Grands Magasins du Louvre*, he accidentally spilled a bottle of *La Rose Jacqueminot* on the counter. Women suddenly swarmed to the counter and bought his entire stock in a few minutes. Thereafter, Coty scents and cosmetics seduced the entire world."

Grand des magasins du Louvre in 1900. Vintage French post card.

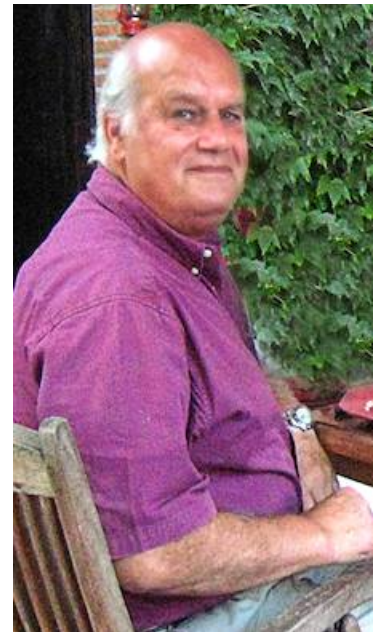
Around the same time, George bought a Russian company called **Rallet**. He repatriated the entire French staff of Rallet back to the Chiris factory in Grasse. It was in this lab that **Ernest Beaux**, a perfumer with a French mother and Russian father, created **Chanel No. 5**. With a twinkle in his eye, Yves repeats what I imagine is more than a twice-told tale. "**Coco Chanel**, who frequented the **Côte d'Azur** in those days, was very close friends with a Russian prince, and through him was introduced to a perfumer formerly from Moscow who was working in Grasse. He was none other than Ernest Beaux. The perfume he created for her boasted a very rich, beautiful fragrance, but it lacked the dynamism and modernity that typified Chanel's taste in fashion at the time. Following her response, he decided to incorporate a new series of aroma chemicals into the samples called aldehydes, which smell like freshly crushed coriander. Beaux sent Madame Chanel 22 different trials. Frustrated that none were what she was looking for, she asked for trial Number 5 to be resubmitted to her. In re-creating the solution, Beaux's lab assistant inadvertently made a mistake and overdosed the aldehyde blend and the sample was sent off without being checked. When Chanel smelled it, she exclaimed, "At last, this is what I've been looking for!" Coco Chanel broke all of the rules, not only because she was the first person to *envisage* a signature scent, but because she had the marketing genius to package the perfume in replicas of the rough, rectangular lab bottle it originally came in with just No. 5 printed on its label."

After running the company successfully for more than 30 years, George passed the helm to Yves' father, Léon. WWII was declared and Léon fled **Provence** via **Spain** to join the **Gaullist French movement** in the **UK**. En route, he was captured (though Yves prefers the word "seduced") by members of the American secret service, who pressed him to return to his factory in Grasse and set up a resistance movement to provide information to the allies. Léon agreed and reorganized the company. During this time, however, the company suffered unprecedented damage. For five years they were cut off from their sources of supply, their personnel were conscripted, and they lost control of all of their floral plantations due to decolonization, throughout the world. The only flower plantation to survive was their lavender plantation in Puberclaire, near **Moustiers**. It was there, where the lavender grows in the lower Alps, that **Yardley of London** sourced their iconic **Yardley's Lavender Soap**.

In 1961, at the age of 24, Yves returned from active duty in the Algerian War and settled into the family business. He learned about growing,



harvesting, production and fragrance creation. But, by then, the hazards of history and the evolution of even newer manufacturing processes took their toll on the Chiris empire and all of French perfumery. A whole new palette of synthetic ingredients was developed and the world market changed. In 1966 Léon Chiris decided to sell the Antoine Chiris Perfume Company to an American company, **Universal Oil Products**, based in **Chicago**. It was the first French company to sell to a foreign group. Yves went on to become Director of UOP in the UK for six years, then Director of UOP in the US for 5 years. Universal Oil Products was sold to **Naarden**, and they in turn were sold to **Unilever**. Subsequently, while working for Unilever, Yves created, amongst many others, such fragrances as *Angel*, *Palais Royal* and *J'Adore*. He retired in 2003 and spends his time lecturing worldwide, teaching at **The Grand Institute of Perfumery** in Grasse, creating perfumes for clients and friends, and occasionally consults with Chanel at their headquarters in Paris.



The light was slowly beginning to wane and we retired to the comfort of Yves' beautifully decorated living room. My husband stopped in front of the fireplace, over which hangs a photograph of **Queen Victoria** and her staff posed in front of The Antoine Chiris factory in Grasse. Yves suggested I follow him into his office. There, I watched him work his magic, pulling one different colored glass vial after another from a rack of meticulously labeled scents. He mixed them into a perfume for me, conjured from his imagination and what he had sensed from our short time together. Yves smiled as he worked. "A fragrance is to a perfume as a color is to a painting, a note to a musical chord, a special ingredient to a dish." When the scent was finished and diffused in the air around me, I closed my eyes and was instantly transported to the hills of Provence at dawn, embraced by a dream.

* If you would like your own personal perfume developed by Yves de Chiris you may contact him at yves@dechiris.com

Sue Aran is a new *BonjourParis* writer who lives in Gascony and Seattle. Please click on her name to learn more about her and her inspiring blog, *Les Trois Amies*. She is already working on her next story, which you can read here soon.



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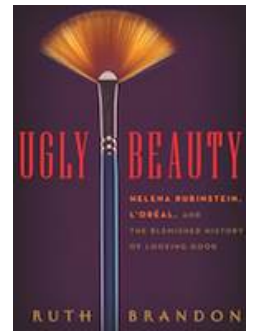
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