



BLACK MAGIC

News that former Gucci Group golden boy Tom Ford was poised to enter the beauty business provoked a media frenzy back in 2005; now the designer's first fragrance, Black Orchid, is achieving the same with its retail sales. And that scent's fragrant flower power is only just the beginning for the Tom Ford Beauty Collection – a comprehensive portfolio of fragrances and cosmetics that aims to redefine luxury and exclusivity the world over. *By Rebecca Mann.*

Tom Ford is back in Black – but this time it’s fragrance, not fashion, that is sporting his trademark dark hue. Black Orchid, the designer’s hotly-awaited first fragrance – and the debut product within the free-standing Tom Ford Beauty Collection – began its selective domestic roll-out in the US last November. In travel retail terms the fragrance went on sale in December 2006, at London Heathrow Terminals Three and Four, in conjunction with World Duty Free.

The fragrance was created in partnership with the Estée Lauder Companies. The collaboration kicked off with two limited-edition collections, Amber Nude and azurée, both of which were lines from the company’s past reinterpreted by Ford and given a more modern, sexy spin.

Black Orchid, however, sets the stage for the second phase of the partnership, blazing a trail for the Tom Ford Beauty Collection, which will be marketed as a separate, stand-alone brand.

The Black Orchid fragrance launch generated headlines all over the world – as indeed did news of the Ford/Lauder alliance back in 2005, with both parties speaking frankly of their high hopes and ambitions for the collaboration.

“We are here today to write a new chapter in beauty history,” declared Estée Lauder Companies Group President John Demsey at the US press conference. “We are about to announce news of such great magnitude that it will chart a new course for the Estée Lauder brand.”

He went on to describe the partnership with Ford as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Ford himself confirmed: “This is a great day for me... The launch of a brand with one’s name on it doesn’t happen every day, and I’m thrilled to have the world’s expert in the field of beauty and prestige fragrance as my partner.”

Fast-forward nearly two years and the initial results suggest that Black Orchid – and the Tom Ford brand – more than live up to the hype. Its selective nature notwithstanding, the company has described the US launch as a resounding success.

“In terms of distribution the launch was small, but the acceptance has been terrific,” confirms company management. “For the US we started in 39 Neiman Marcus



Tom Ford with Julia Restoin-Roitfeld, star of the Black Orchid ad campaign

doors, Saks New York, plus nine Holt Renfrew doors in Canada. That’s just 50 doors in total.

“From January to June 2007 we will expand that distribution by rolling out into other Saks doors, and to Bergdorf Goodman. But we still won’t be in more than 300 doors by the end of the fiscal year, which is still comparatively quite small. The purpose of the Black Orchid fragrance, and the Tom Ford brand, is to stay selective.”

Within that selective distribution strategy, travel retail has been earmarked to play a small but significant role. “The [channel] is one of our key priorities,” confirms the company. “We have started very exclusively, with World Duty Free at Heathrow. We are considering a very few additional

doors, to be opened by the end of the fiscal year; negotiations are taking place now.

“Later this year the launch of the men’s product will give us a more definite position, and we will fine-tune the travel retail roll-out accordingly. But it will still not be in all travel retail doors; only in certain appropriate [flagship]

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Just the beginning: Black Orchid is the first step in building the Tom Ford beauty brand

locations, plus those doors where the corresponding domestic markets are performing extremely well.”

Asia will be opened when the colour cosmetics offer is launched. “The brand positioning will be somewhat reversed in Asia,” the company acknowledges. “Asia is still not a particularly strong fragrance market, so there we will lead with the [cosmetics] element.

“But certainly the Tom Ford name means a lot in the region, thanks to his great fashion authority.”

Outside North America, Black Orchid was introduced last year in the UK, Germany, France, Switzerland and Italy. Again, the retailers chosen were suitably selective, such as Selfridges and Harvey Nichols in London, and La Rinascente in Milan. The number of doors pre-Christmas 2006 numbered fewer than 50.

Boosted by record-breaking personal appearances, sales last year soared into the top spot at both Saks and Neiman Marcus. The secret of its appeal? “This fragrance has depth and longevity, and smells like nothing else [available],” notes one industry source.

“It is sensual and rich, and is so much the embodiment of Tom, who worked very closely on the signature and projection of the fragrance. Because it’s so different, the first spray sometimes surprises customers. They may go away, but they always come back after ten minutes.”

Big as it is to date, Black Orchid is merely the beginning. “We are not just launching a fragrance, we are building a new brand, under the name of Tom Ford,” confirms company management.

Accordingly there are already several more launches lined up, including the intriguing Tom Ford Private Blend, scheduled to make its bow this spring. This is a collection of 12 high-end unisex fragrances, which will be launched simultaneously.

“Private Blend is the fragrance equivalent of couture,” notes one source. “It is a personal vision of luxury in fragrance. Tom’s brief to the perfumers was to find the most exclusive, expensive, rare ingredients – there were to be no cost constraints, no limits. The products feature a lot of naturals and pure extractions.

“What has been created is 12 different and unique signatures, personalities and moods. And they smell money; they smell expensive. A lot of time has been spent perfecting them, and they are genuinely ground-breaking.”

In addition to Private Blend, a men’s fragrance will be launched in the autumn. Skincare lines (for men and women) and make-up are also in the pipeline.

But each line will receive due care and attention. “We want to execute every launch properly, to roll out everything very carefully, because we want to maintain a luxury, top-end image.

That’s our first priority,” states the company.

“Our other mission is to generate more brand awareness, and to create the right buzz. We want to be demanded, as opposed to overwhelm.”

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But who is likely to do this demanding? Is there one definitive Tom Ford customer, or are there many different targets?

“The Tom Ford consumer is a real fashionista,” maintains the company. “This means it’s all about an attitude towards beauty, more than a specific age. We have very young customers, but also mature ones. Tom has managed to make this brand timeless, contemporary and modern... by [reworking] the history of fragrance and incorporating real craftsmanship, quality and detail.”

All of which comes at a price. Is the luxury positioning, with its corresponding price points, proving to be a barrier to younger consumers, who might aspire to the brand – but not be able to afford it?

Absolutely not, maintains the company. “There has been no resistance to the price,” states one industry source, “not even to the [limited-edition] US\$600 perfume. Yes, the brand is positioned at the top tier of the industry. But when the quality is obviously there, people are prepared to pay for it.”

They are also prepared to pay for something different. Black Orchid, and indeed the other elements of the Tom Ford Beauty Collection, certainly stand out in an overcrowded marketplace, thanks largely to Ford’s all-encompassing vision and well-known attention to detail.

“Everything is coherent,” comments the company. “Not just the products, but the advertising, the counters, the furniture, the merchandising, the POS material, and so on. Tom is truly the architect of the entire brand.

“He has researched the history of the beauty industry – how make-up was used by the Hollywood stars, how glass was blown, how perfumers used to work – and made that history modern.

“And only Tom could do this. He has this authority, this clear and simple vision, and he is very good at editing [out] anything that does not contribute to it. He knows absolutely what he wants, and how he wants his brand to be. Tom has this ability to look into the future and know exactly what his customers want – even before they do. He is able to not just anticipate future trends, but to impose them.”

And the key trend now is a move towards pure, unadulterated luxury. “When Tom worked at Gucci he made luxury accessible to everyone,” notes one industry source.

“He contributed to the democratisation of luxury. Now it is time for a swing back to real, high-end luxury. That’s the brand statement.”

And it’s being made with some style. Rewind to that comment by John Demsey about writing a new chapter in beauty history. Tom Ford is back, and he means business. Brace yourself for a blockbuster read. ■



Appealing to all ages: Tom Ford the brand is described as timeless, contemporary and modern

