

ANNIVERSARY

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PHOTOGRAPH FRANK MILLER

NOSE JOB

In a purple field down Wicklow way, there's a fragrance to be bottled

THE ARMY OF bumble bees may not know it as they work to the rumbling sound of the N11 in a field of purple. But they are part of what is possibly the world's most expensive lavender oil production line.

We are standing in the Fragrances of Ireland lavender field in Co Wicklow. It is a sight experienced by some as a bright blur on the left as they slow down and watch for speed-traps at Kilmacnogue on the road from Dublin to Wicklow.

Inside a shed at the back of the field, a tall chrome still waits for the blossoms, which will be hand-picked soon, and put inside to boil. The steam will evaporate and the golden yellow lavender oil will be allowed to drip into collection jars.

The whole two-and-a-half-acre field will produce just three litres of lavender oil, maybe four if they are lucky. With most perfume oils coming from countries where the weather is hot and the labour cheap, this Wicklow oil is hard-won and has more than a bit of kooky marketing attached to its annual harvesting ritual.

The company's philosophy is a mixture of "new agey and old fashioned", according to its managing director, David Cox, and is celebrating two anniversaries this year. It was set up a quarter of a century ago by his father, Brian, and the founder of Avoca Handweavers, Donald Pratt. More surprisingly in a world where today's perfume is tomorrow's remaindered bottle (and where Jade Goody's scent, shh, was once a top seller), they are celebrating 10 years of Inis, their cologne for men and women.

As an idea for a perfume, it was simple but tricky. "We wanted it to smell like a summer's day by the sea," Cox explains. It was 1997 and they were more than aware that their new product would have survive in an ocean of celebrity endorsements and gigantic marketing budgets.

"I think an awful lot of perfumes are originating in a boardroom somewhere, dreamed up by a lot of men in suits who ask questions like, 'How much will it cost to get a licence from this star to do a fragrance?' There are at least 250 new perfumes launched every year but only 5 to 10 per cent of them will live beyond their first year," Cox says.

A lawyer by training, Cox took over the running of the family firm shortly after it was set up. "It was purely about making products for tour-



ists," he explains. "Unashamedly so. In the 1980s, I don't think you would have persuaded anyone in Ireland to buy anything Irish-made." After cornering that market successfully, he wanted to broaden the range. Cox admits he was fed up with some of the friendly sniggering that went on about his product and its position in duty-free shops alongside the gift-wrapped sods of turf.

He brought in photographer and marketing expert Peter Sellers and they engaged the late English perfumer, Arthur Burnham, and told him what was required. At one point the perfumer told them he was a bit stumped, sitting at his desk in deepest England, struggling to find the right blend to evoke Atlantic seaboard freshness. Cox and Sellers flew him to Knock Airport and drove him to Dog's Bay in Roundstone. It was a crystal-clear day and he stood on the warm white sand and said, "I've got it". There would be notes of lemon, lily of the valley and cloves. A year later

David Cox, of Fragrances of Ireland, in his lavender field at Kilmacnogue, Co Wicklow

We wanted it to smell like a summer's day by the sea

Inis was on the shelves.

Cox and Sellers celebrated the fragrance's 10th birthday last month with a pilgrimage to the place of inspiration. They took to the roads on a Friday morning and drove to Connemara, where they waded into the Atlantic for a swim to mark the occasion.

At trade shows, Cox is amazed at the variety of men and women of all ages who wear the cologne. The company, with an annual turnover of €2.7 million, exports half of its products, which include Patrick cologne, Connemara perfume for women and a range of soaps. The US and Germany are its biggest overseas markets. The lavender field could never provide enough oil for the full range, but Cox has just put two purple and white Fresian cow cut-outs into the field to catch the eye of passing motorists.

"We never pretend our range is based on exclusively Irish ingredients, but it is nice for us to use what we have," he says.