

An aerial photograph of a vast lavender field in France, showing neat rows of purple flowers stretching towards the horizon. The perspective is from a high angle, looking down on the field.

In Nice, flowers are not just for decoration – they are for cooking, competing, carnivals and more. We meet the people behind the French Riviera’s blossoming floral scene

Petal power



Words: Nancy Heslin

With a balmy Mediterranean climate and verdant rolling countryside, it is not all that surprising that Nice, and the surrounding Côte d'Azur, is prime flower-growing territory: roses, lavender, geraniums, fuchsias, jasmine and impatiens are all abundant here.

But the ways in which those flowers are used are anything but ordinary. As well as being the location of the perfume capital of the world (and forming the HQ of the French fragrance scene for the likes of Dior, Chanel and Louis Vuitton), flowers are also the centrepiece of the annual Nice Carnival festivities, the top tourist attractions and even the focus of a brand-new garden festival launching this spring. We went to meet the floral fanatics behind each project, and discover why Nice's love affair with blooms continues to grow. →

GETTY



THE FESTIVAL PRESIDENT

“The French Riviera is a garden paradise,” declares Jean Mus, landscape artist and Jury President of the first Côte d’Azur Garden Festival, taking place this spring from 1 April – 1 May. With the theme ‘Awaken the Senses’, the inaugural garden festival is part of the European project JARDIVAL to safeguard the historic Riviera gardens created over centuries of “cultural, political and economic exchanges”, and will see 10 contestants each design a garden. Their horticultural artistry will then be marked

by a panel of international judges, headed by Mus, and the winner will be awarded a €10,000 prize. The festival will take place across the Riviera, from Nice (Jardin Albert 1er at the Promenade du Paillon) to Cannes (Jardin de la Villa Rothschild), Antibes (Pinède Gould in Juan-les-Pins), Grasse (Place du Petit Puy et Place de l’Évêché) and Menton (Jardin Biovès).

In addition to the main festival gardens, which spectators will be allowed to explore, another 80 gardens in 28 towns across the Côte d’Azur will host exhibitions,



Jury president Jean Mus (far left) and the Jardin Albert 1er (left), next to the Promenade du Paillon (below), where the festival will take place



“For 150 years, we have enjoyed a fantastic and worldwide reputation, from the perfumes in Grasse to the roses of Antibes and the local mimosa”

“Versailles-style small park” at the renovated Ritz Paris, the gardens of Monaco’s Grimaldi Forum and The Navarino, Greece’s largest hotel complex. “There is no one flower that represents the Côte d’Azur, but rather a collective ambience built upon French, Italian and Arabic concepts and philosophy,” says Mus.

Educated by his father who was a “fantastic gardener”, the Grasse native studied at the Garden and Landscape School of Versailles and was heavily influenced by Ferdinand Bac, whose

gardens, Les Colombières, in Menton are classified as French national heritage sites. Based in Cabris, near Grasse, Mus, who is also the co-author of several books including *Mediterranean Gardens*, admits that he didn’t choose his profession, but rather “the garden chose me”. Now, Mus is excited to see the Côte d’Azur in full bloom like never before. “The garden festival is a chance to showcase the Riviera as a paradise of sea, sun and flowers. A true *art de vivre*, like Nice itself.”

en.nicetourisme.com/agenda/event/6095 →

workshops and guided tours. Visitors will also be invited to vote for their favourite garden design as part of the Festival ON’s Prix du Public (public prize).

According to Mus, the festival is being launched in tribute to the area’s incredible floral heritage. “For 150 years, we have enjoyed a fantastic and worldwide reputation, from the perfumes in Grasse to the roses of Antibes and the local mimosa,” he says. Speaking by phone from a remote area in France, the acclaimed landscape architect’s portfolio includes the 2,000m²

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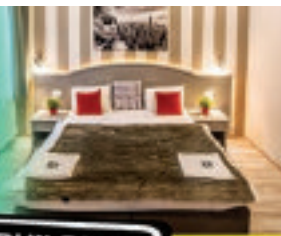
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Denis Zanon (left), is the artistic director of the Bataille de Fleurs (above), a tradition that started in 1876

THE CARNIVAL DIRECTOR

To get a real dose of flower power, there's no experience more exhilarating than Nice's Carnival, which runs for two weeks, always ending on the first day of Mardi Gras. This year's event, which costs a whopping €6.5 million to put on, takes place from 11–26 February and will mark the 133rd edition of the carnival, which can trace its very earliest incarnations back as far as 1294. As usual, a themed royal (this year, the King of Energy) will preside over the events, but the route changes, leaving the glorious Promenade des Anglais in favour of the Promenade du Paillon, the €40 million park off Place Massena that opened in 2013.

"Some of the most spectacular moments of the whole carnival are the Bataille de Fleurs, or flower battles,"

says Denis Zanon, the Director of Nice's Office of Tourism and Congress, as well as the organiser and artistic director of the carnival. "There are 18 floats in every battle parade and each one is decorated with between 4,000 to 5,000 flowers," he says.

The battle tradition is said to have started in 1876, when wealthy British tourists broke the long-time (and messy) tradition of tossing eggs and confetti plaster during the parade, instead opting to throw flowers at each other. "The local flower producers saw this as a marketing opportunity to show they could grow flowers at this time of year," says Zanon.

Today, there are five flower battles during the two-week carnival. Each one lasts about two hours and sees five tonnes of locally-grown mimosa distributed to the crowd for flinging. Then, a parade of floats intricately decorated in floral motifs journeys through the streets to the sounds of live music, while the crowds throw the mimosa in praise. It has to be seen to be believed, and according to Zanon you'll be in good company. "It's the third largest carnival of its kind worldwide, and it attracts a million visitors to Nice," he says proudly. "It's utterly spectacular."

nicecarnaval.com/en →



Paul Barelli (left) is a regular fixture on the Cours Selaya, where he sells mimosa, lavender and orchids as “souvenirs of Nice”

THE FLOWER SELLER

For 25 years, just like his mother before him, Paul Barelli has been selling flowers at Nice’s iconic Cours Selaya market, located behind “the Prom”, at the east end of the city. “In Paris, the first place that tourists head to is the Eiffel Tower. In Nice, it’s the Cours Selaya,” says Barelli, who is the head of the flower market’s Producer and Resellers Association.

From Tuesday to Sunday, 14 *fleuristes* line the entrance to the daily market in Old Nice, tempting those making their way towards sweet berries, smelly cheeses and savoury olives to stop and, literally, smell the roses, as well as the honeyed mimosa, fragrant lavender and butterscotch orchids. “You can see on their faces that sightseers are taken aback when they visit the flower market, it’s an unexpected surprise in beauty and also price,” says Barelli. “We have the lowest prices anywhere on the Côte d’Azur.”

While in recent years many of the flower producers in Nice and its surroundings have retired or sold off their land, the majority of the blooms (stalls can sell flowers or plants but not both in accordance to local legislation) still stem from the region. Barelli is a regular fixture here and numerous passers-by stop to give the man who “can’t imagine doing anything else” a familiar *bisou* (kiss) on each cheek. “Spring is the best time to witness the regional flowers,” he adds in between the salutations. “There are 20 to 30 varieties, all beautiful souvenirs of Nice.” →

“You can see on their faces that sightseers are taken aback when they visit the flower market. It’s an unexpected surprise in beauty and also price”



REBECCA MARSHALL



Yves Terrillon (right) runs floral cookery courses, which teach budding chefs how to make inventive dishes like scallops with nasturtiums

THE FLORAL FOODIE

Twenty kilometres west of Nice, Antibes is as famous for its port (lined with mega-yachts) as it is for its spectacular scented roses and the not-to-be-missed Jardin Thuret. One of the towns participating in the new garden festival, it's also here that budding chefs can find La Cuisine des Fleurs by Yves Terrillon (take the 200 bus from Nice for €1.50, stop at La Fontonne) to learn how to cook with flowers, and use them to flavour water, essential oils and jams.

Having studied at Jean Ferrandi, the French school of culinary arts in Paris, before moving to Grasse in 2001, Terrillon says: "I became interested in cooking with the flowers because it was so easy to find the raw materials from local flower producers."

At his state-of-the-art atelier in Antibes, Terrillon offers floral cookery courses in English, including an imaginative menu such as foie gras bonbons with violets and scallops with nasturtium petals (not to mention dessert: pineapple ice cream with hibiscus) – for groups of eight to 200.

"It's important to soft-cook fresh flowers in a moist



environment – for example, under poultry skin," the chef says. "Flowers bring colour but they also have a complex flavour palette from the moment they are used. And they offer a true taste of the region, since each blossom has a terroir and a history here." crea-t-yvesculinaire.com →

"I became interested in cooking with the flowers because it was so easy to find the raw materials from local flower producers"

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THE FLOWER GROWER

The Côte d'Azur's floral history has genuine Grasse roots, because the town of that name – Grasse – is considered the perfume capital of the world. Thanks to its micro-climate, Grasse has been a hive of activity ever since 1747, when the first fragrance company, Parfumerie Galimard, was founded here. More followed, and it is now home to 60 businesses employing some 3,000 workers. Collectively, they produce the raw materials, flavours and fragrances that make up 50 percent of perfume industry turnover in France and eight percent worldwide. More recently, in September 2016 Louis Vuitton returned to the market after 70 years with the launch of seven new fragrances. The location the fashion house chose for brand-new fragrance lab Les Fontaines Parfumées was, of course, Grasse.

Carole Biancalana is a fourth-generation flower grower at Domaine de Manon in Plascassier, just outside Grasse, and is also President of Les Fleurs d'Exception du Pays de Grasse, an association that she says, “promotes flowers to future generations, and helps them get into the industry”. Carole harvests May rose, jasmine and tuberose for fragrance powerhouse Dior. It may sound dreamy, but it's a tough profession, involving physical labour every day from 6–11am during harvest months. “Cultivating exceptional flowers is a very special art, and it takes a lot of work. We harvest for 100 consecutive days,” she says, “and the flower-growing industry is competitive.” She won't reveal the value, for example, of jasmine, but to put it into perspective, she



Carol Biancalana (right), a fourth generation flower grower in Plascassier, just outside Grasse, harvests flowers for fragrance powerhouse Dior



“Cultivating exceptional flowers is a very special art, and it takes a lot of work. We harvest for 100 consecutive days”



says 10,000 tonnes of extracted jasmine petals produce just one litre of essential oil. And if she doesn't get her morning petals to the factory by noon, they could lose their potency and she could lose money.

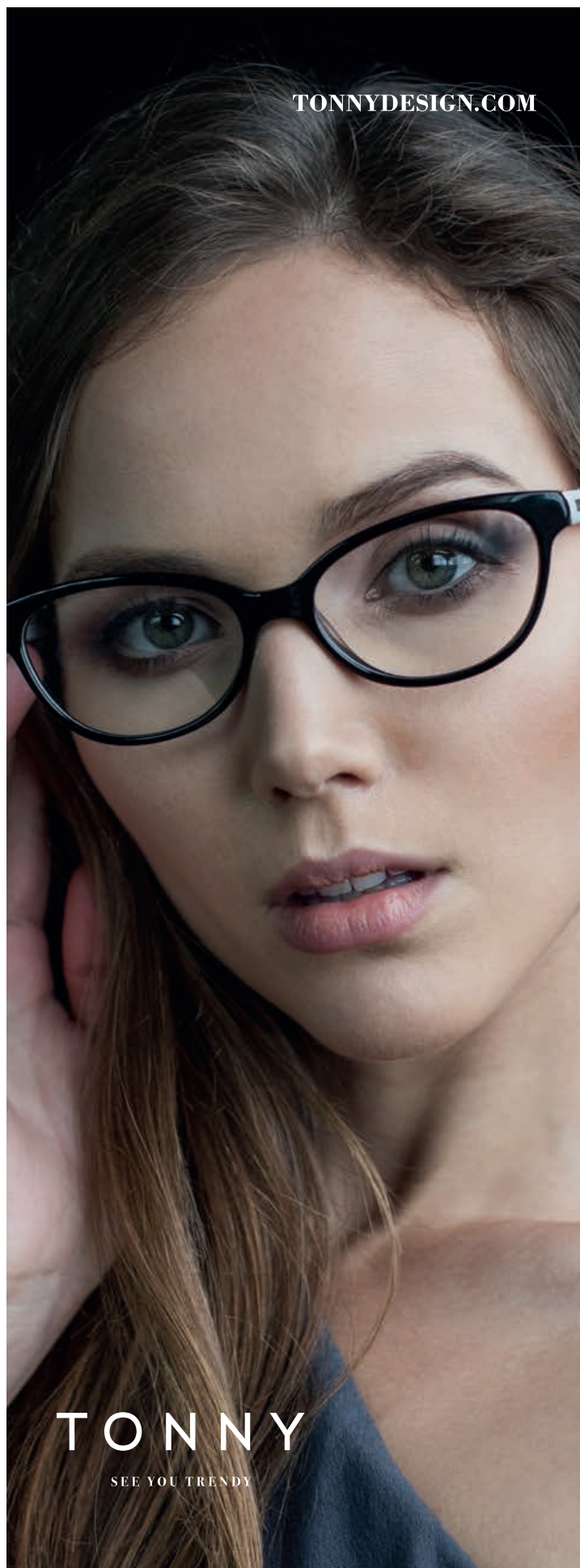
For Biancalana, though, it's not just about making a living. Working alongside her daughter, who picks with her during the university holidays, she fondly recalls memories of sitting on the same soil with her grandmother. "She patiently taught me everything she knew about cultivating flowers and the land," says Biancalana. Now, she shares some of her own knowledge with visitors via weekly tours, beginning on Tuesdays at 9am between August and October (€6). It's a picture worth a thousand scents. ■

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