

HEAVEN SCENT

A leap of faith by beauty insider Miranda Waple saw her collaborate with iconic Kiwi designer, Karen Walker, to create her line of perfumes

Five years ago, Miranda Waple was taking a career break when she had a lightbulb moment. The Auckland beauty entrepreneur had not long finished an 18-year career with L'Oréal – a job which saw her launch perfumes like Armani and Diesel in Auckland, and visit perfume houses in Paris.

With a marketing and management background and fluent in French, Miranda had decided to take a break to spend more time with her sons – Luca (now 13) and Zac (now nine) – and see where her career might take her. A few days into her new life, Miranda recalls, “I thought, ‘I wonder if Karen Walker is going to launch a fragrance?’”

MEET THE MAKER

It was thanks to L'Oréal that Miranda first met and worked with Karen back in 2005, when the beauty brand launched Viktor & Rolf's perfume, Flowerbomb. Karen stocked Viktor & Rolf clothing so Miranda asked if they could hold the press launch in her Newmarket store, and get the

perfume stocked exclusively in her boutiques. Since then, they had also become friendly acquaintances, moving in similar circles.

As easy as that lightbulb moment was, it was far more difficult for Miranda to persuade the global designer to add fragrances to her fashion and homewares line. Miranda first sent an email asking if Karen was launching a fragrance. Karen replied they would like to but it would probably be too hard. Then, through 2013, Miranda met with Karen and her board about 10 times, in an effort to persuade them to launch a fragrance line. Each time, the board – including Karen's husband, Mikhail Gherman, the brand's creative director – gave her a new challenge to answer.

“I'd go away for an hour and email Karen back and say, ‘Okay, what if we did it like this?’” the 48-year-old says, rearranging a bottle of Karen Walker's first male fragrance, Monumental, on a glass shelf at Auckland's Smith and Caughey's department store.

At the time, they both had children at the same school. Miranda would put on her ➤



Left: Miranda helped create Karen Walker's perfume range, including Monumental (right), Karen's first fragrance for men.



lipstick and get out of her comfortable around-the-house clothes for the school pick-up “in case I bumped into Karen”, she smiles.

SECRET SCENTS

The next hitch was finding the money to create the fragrances, and Miranda started working behind the scenes to set up a company, Six Senses, as a brand partner. Businesswoman Theresa Gattung came on board, along with other female investors who all had to sign non-disclosure agreements. Says Miranda, “I had to, in secret, get people to invest in a company that was hopefully going to create Karen’s fragrances. I thought it sounded risky but it sounded exciting too.”

Eleven months after she left L’Oréal, Karen and her board agreed to go ahead with a fragrance line, and Miranda and Six Senses were on board to help create them. “It’s one thing to get the go-ahead and another to actually make them,” Miranda explains, adding that each scent takes 18 months to develop from an idea to liquid in a gleaming bottle.

Karen tells NEXT she had hoped to tell the Karen Walker story in an olfactory way. “As with every project we do, one of my main rules before I start working with anyone is the ‘Would I invite them into my home for dinner?’ test. Over our years working together, Miranda and I have become good pals and comrades, and we always have a bit of a laugh when we’re together and that’s so important in any relationship.”

They had a lot of laughs on a research trip to visit perfume houses in Grasse, home of the world’s biggest fragrance houses, and to Paris. Recalls Miranda: “I was driving around these tiny, narrow streets while Karen worked the GPS and Mikhail was in the back. In the back of my head I kept thinking, ‘The responsibility of driving Karen Walker around is huge.’”

STRIKE A NOTE

On that trip, they narrowed their research down to three perfume houses, including the world’s oldest perfume house, Charabot, which was set up in 1799. Miranda, Karen and Mikhail sampled about 50 different scents the ‘noses’ (scientists with doctorates in chemistry) put forward, always in an airtight room.

“There are hundreds of different perfume notes to choose from, and the notes can smell different when they are mixed with other notes in varying



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compositions,” says Miranda. She explains the first notes are ‘head’ notes often containing fruit (grapefruit, bergamot, mandarin, and so on).

“These notes then evolve as they are enveloped by the ‘heart notes’ which often include flowers, and finally the ‘base’ notes arrive on the senses, and change the scent again, often with woods, vetiver, precious resins like amber, musk, patchouli, and gourmand notes of praline, tonka bean, vanilla.”

“You can take the exact same notes and combine them in different ways and create

completely different fragrances. In a way, these perfumers with their base in chemistry are like scientist and poet combined, or like the conductor of an orchestra informing each instrument when and how to make its unique sound, to create an olfactory masterpiece.”

While Miranda has never mixed a perfume, she knows more than most of us; indeed, Karen and Mikhail call her “the perfume lady”. Says Karen: “I suspect Miranda probably knows more about fragrance, and the business of fragrance, than any other person in New Zealand.”



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THE STORY OF SCENT

Based on that trip, the first fragrance launched in 2015 was a trio, Karen Walker’s A, B, C eau du parfum range. Miranda says that she pressed for a ‘gourmand’ fragrance in the range – a perfume that contains edible notes, such as caramel, honey, chocolate or nuts. That fragrance turned out to be B, the trio’s bestseller and winner of the best female fragrance category in the 2016 Bauer Beauty Awards. Three other Karen Walker perfumes have followed A, B, C – Hi There, Runaway and Runaway Azure – before the recent launch of the men’s fragrance, Monumental. However, Miranda doesn’t have to trek to France every time a fragrance is being made. Instead, she emails and Skypes perfumers and noses with her wish list, viewing the samples with Karen and Mikhail when they arrive. “Karen signs off everything. Everything is her design and her vision.”

Karen has said before that a perfume

should be a form of self-expression, saying something about the wearer in the way that clothes do. “It is a natural extension to have a fragrance, in the same way it is to have eyewear, or bags or shoes, but you’ve still got to find a way of doing it that is unique to you, that is authentic, and honest and exciting, and feels real.”

ADVENTURE ABROAD

Miranda has loved perfume since she surreptitiously doused herself in her mother’s Samsara perfume growing up in Wellington in the 80s. Back then, New Zealand women favoured heavy, strong, Oriental scents like Guerlain’s Samsara and Dior’s Poison, and you could smell them as soon as they walked into a room. Miranda’s first perfume, though was the floral Anais Anais, gifted to her at age 12.

When she left school, Miranda studied French and marketing at the University of Otago before heading to Paris, aged 22, to study at the prestigious business school, HEC. She was the first New Zealander to graduate four years later with a major in entrepreneurial studies.

Fluent in French, the enterprising Kiwi applied for an intern job in Paris, as product manager of L’Oréal’s Garnier Fructis haircare brand – one of 22,000 applicants for the coveted job – with the mission of growing the brand. If she met a senior manager in the lift of the 10-floor building, Miranda had to be able to reel off shampoo sales down to the exact number of bottles.

Miranda’s job took her all over Europe, to glamorous places like Milan where she spent all day in a room trying to choose the colour for the package of a shampoo sample. “I rejected every colour they showed me because none were quite right. Everything had to be perfect,” she recalls.

A NEW MISSION

Working at L’Oréal’s head office in Paris made Miranda the savvy businesswoman she is today, and also taught her some core values she shares with Karen: a need for hard work, a need for perfection, and an idea of how to create and build a brand. “I’ve always been the type to think that if you’re going to do something, do your best job. Now having a small business and children, I add that you should do the best you can, sometimes in the time constraints you have.”

Back in New Zealand, she was promoted to head of L’Oréal Luxe. Three months after Luca was born, Miranda was back at work, promoting Lancôme face creams and pumping breast milk at work. L’Oréal Luxe experienced double digit growth during her time there. “I went out on a high.”

Her new role as head of Six Senses means she is creating her own destiny. “After 20 odd years in the beauty industry, I can say that skincare is important... but fragrance is the one that makes women dream. The sense of smell is the oldest memory that we have,” she says.

Pumping a spray of Karen Walker’s Runaway Azure in the department store, Miranda says she feels naked without a splash of perfume. Her goal, among others, is to expand Karen Walker fragrances into countries beyond New Zealand and the United Kingdom.

An added bonus is that after travelling and working together so intensely, her relationship with Karen and Mikhail has moved from being acquaintances to friends. “They entrusted me to help bring their fragrance vision to life, and this has made us close. It is a unique relationship, based on respect and friendship, which spurs me to do the very best job I can for these people who I care so much about.” ✱

Words Sarah Cathraill Photographs Tony Nyberg and supplied Hair and makeup Sharon Laurence-Anderson