

Skin Deep

Perfumer Draws Fire Over a Scent Called 'Peace'

By RUTH LA FERLA

LAURICE RAHMÉ has a temperament too volatile to be contained in a bottle. But that, in a manner of speaking, is exactly what she has set out to do. Ms. Rahmé, the hard-charging impresario behind Bond No. 9, a collection of Manhattan-centric fragrances with names like Park Avenue, New Harlem, Chelsea Flowers and Chinatown, seems to have spiked each of them with a generous dram of her own personality.

"I know what New York needs," Ms. Rahmé, a former Parisian, insisted earlier this month over tea at her NoHo boutique on Bond Street. And that is nothing less than to change the way that New York smells, she said, enveloping her adoptive city in a wardrobe of scents, each named for a distinct neighborhood, each an attempt to capture New York's essence in a flask.

Her latest fragrance, the ambitiously christened "Scent of Peace," is a departure, in that its blend of grapefruit, black currant, cedar and musk, is not linked with a specific quarter of Manhattan. "Peace," as Ms. Rahmé declared with some heat, "is a neighborhood we all want to live in."

The new perfume, introduced last month at a series of lunches in the Delegates' Dining Room of the United Nations, was inspired by Sept. 11, 2001, she declared. "It was New York that was attacked not so long ago, so if there is a message of peace, that



too has to start in New York," she said.

Might the Scent of Peace be her way of laying claim to yet another neighborhood, the former World Trade Center site — as some of her detractors have suggested? Ms. Rahmé bristles at the idea. "This is one neighborhood I am not going to capitalize on," she said.

Allan Mottus, the editor of The Informationist, a fragrance industry publication, is not so sure. "I wouldn't put it past her," he said. "She's a pretty aggressive marketer." The controversy surrounding Ms. Rahmé does not stop with her latest fragrance campaign. Though few would go on the record, retailers and others who have worked with her portray her as something of an industry *bête noire*, combative and obstinate.

"It's true, I'm tough," Ms. Rahmé acknowledged the other day. "I have to fight for everything, every foot of space in a store, the quality of the people that present our product. Right, I'm known to be demanding. But I'm very demanding of myself."

Fractiousness has not stood in her way. The four-year-old Bond No. 9 brand is distributed in Ms. Rahmé's four Manhattan boutiques, at Saks Fifth Avenue stores around the country, and internationally from London to Hong Kong and Dubai. And Ms. Rahmé has admirers, among them con-



FLAVORS OF NEW YORK Laurice Rahmé, a former Parisian, has found success with her Bond No. 9 fragrances, which until now have been named for neighborhoods in New York.

noisseurs of scent who praise her perfumes as among the world's most sophisticated. Others predict that Ms. Rahmé, who says she expects to nearly double her \$8 million volume this year, is poised to become a key player in the hypercompetitive world of luxury fragrances.

"She is a pro," Mr. Mottus said. At a time when luxury scents are becoming increasingly commodified, Ms. Rahmé's fragrances, which sell for just under \$200, are, he said, giving the consumer her money's worth in quality and originality.

So keen are her instincts, he added, she puts him in mind of a handful of entrepreneurial legends like Milton Stern of Oscar de la Renta, Bernard Mitchell, who created Jovan, and the redoubtable Estée Lauder herself. "Laurice is a fighter," Mr. Mottus said, "but she is very much about building things."

Ms. Rahmé spent many of her 30 years in this country as a distributor, building an American presence for brands like Lancôme, Annick Goutal and Creed. She struck out on her own in the challenging days after Sept. 11. Financing her business largely with her own savings, she introduced Bond No. 9, named for her downtown flagship store, which started with 16 fragrances and has since expanded to 25. Scents like Bleeker Street, a blend of vanilla and cassis, and Chinatown, with a caramel note, are best sellers at Saks, where Bond No. 9, the store reports, is among five top-selling brands, competing with behemoths like Chanel and

Estée Lauder.

To critics who charge that Ms. Rahmé has built her success on little more than fancy wrappings (bottles with racy, dancer-like curves, emblazoned with the image of a subway token) and canny marketing gimmicks, Ms. Rahmé responds that in branding her line, she deferred to a Parisian tradition by which certain fragrances like Champs Élysées (Guerlain) or Rive Gauche (Yves Saint Laurent) are named for distinct quarters of the city.

Raves for a New York line of fragrances but questions about the latest inspiration.

The tactic worked. "In an era when the fragrance counter is so saturated with product, many that resemble each other, she has created an identity around New York, rather than, say, around a celebrity," said Jenny B. Fine, the editor of Beauty Biz, a trade monthly. "That marks her as an original."

Sitting at the rear of the Bond Street emporium, which is draped like a seraglio in yards of muslin and Indian wedding saris, Ms. Rahmé asserted that she is particularly suited to spreading a message of peace with her new perfume. "I was in the last peace

movement," she said invoking her student days, marching alongside fellow rebels at the Paris barricades, "And I will be in the next one."

That renegade spirit, she said, is what first prompted her to start her business and made her a force to be reckoned with in the increasingly competitive niche fragrance category. But she did not get there without burning some bridges.

As the former distributor of Annick Goutal and Creed, Ms. Rahmé had gained entry into top-tier stores like Bergdorf Goodman and Barneys New York. But, those who have worked with her say, she soon began butting heads with store executives, in part because she refused to comply with conventional practices like taking back unsold merchandise, or contributing her share of the advertising allowance.

"She does business her way or no way, and that is very hard," said a retailer who declined to be named, citing company policy.

Barneys and Bergdorf, which carry the brands she once distributed, do not sell Bond No. 9, a proven hit. "Laurice is passionate about her business," said Kate Oldham, the divisional merchandise manager of fragrances at Saks, "and that can sometimes be seen as a negative."

Her reputation for ferocity was reinforced three years ago by the very public rupture of her business alliance with Olivier Creed, the owner of Creed fragrances. Accusing him of undermining the business by

discounting large quantities of Creed perfumes on the Internet and on the Asian gray market, she retaliated, converting her New York Creed stores into Bond boutiques and slashing prices furiously. Creed initiated legal proceedings against her, alleging she had not paid invoices totaling \$1 million.

Ms. Rahmé acknowledged that she owed Mr. Creed "a sum of money." "But," she added, "he owes me much more."

Not a perfumer herself, Ms. Rahmé commissions her scents from internationally renowned perfumers, luring them with the promise of creative independence. "Laurice trusts me a lot," said Maurice Roucel, who conceived New Harlem, Broadway Nights and Riverside Drive. "I was quite free to create what I wanted, and she was not too pushy."

"I'm only a conductor; they are the musicians," Ms. Rahmé said, then confided in the next breath that she can be obsessive about achieving the long-lasting scents she is after. "I sniff and sniff," she said. "I take all their creative talent, and then I'm a pest."

Nothing wrong with that, said Luca Turin, a biophysicist and expert on scent, who ranks Chinatown as "sensational — one of the greats."

Its success may well be the result of a relentless pursuit of perfection, he suggested. But that is perhaps as it should be. "If you want to get a business going in New York," he said, "being a wallflower is not going to help."