



WELLBEING

## Holy smoke

The mystical scent of palo santo has found a modern fanbase. By *Nateisha Scott*

“People are seeking more from their fragrances – those that can reduce stress or help people cope or think clearly really appeal right now,” says Clare Varga, head of beauty at forecasting agency WGSN. “And in this era of polycrisis, palo santo is finding a new relevance as a way to help to deal with anxiety.”

Roughly translating to “holy wood”, palo santo is the Spanish name for *Bursera graveolens* – a wild tree that’s native to South America and is rooted in ancient practice, history and indigenous wisdom. “Healers have long used palo santo during fumigation rituals to rid themselves of negative energies and optimise healing on a physical and spiritual level,” says Victoire de Taillac, co-founder of French beauty brand Buly 1803, which sells palo santo sticks for burning (€25, 1). “The aniseed scent is said to cleanse negativity, while its woody and balsamic aromas bring peace and harmony.”

Traditionally, the commercial use of palo santo is strictly governed. The tree grows in the wild for between 30 and 40 years and, according to law, “can only be harvested after its natural death”, says de Taillac. “However, now that the market is flourishing, illegal practices of cutting or uprooting the tree to extract its oil are becoming more commonplace.”

It’s easy to see why brands are keen to harness the powers of palo santo. Its combination of terpenes (organic compounds responsible for aroma and flavour, among other things) include myrcene, a relaxant; pinene, which improves focus; terpinolene, which may reduce anxiety; terpineol, an anti-inflammatory antioxidant; and beta bisabolene, which has antimicrobial properties. Varga also highlights the “new appreciation of ancient wisdom and Lo-TEK beauty [Traditional Ecological Knowledge]: indigenous wisdom is being celebrated for its efficiency, sophistication and sustainability, and paired with modern science and scent delivery to bring it to a new audience.

Sustainably harvested palo santo oil can be found in a number of skin and haircare formulations, such as Rahua’s Classic Shampoo (£34, 2) and Conditioner (£36). Inge Theron, founder of FaceGym, whose Youth Reformer Firming Vitamin C Face Serum (£88) contains natural palo santo, adds that the antioxidant properties “help soothe irritation, reduce redness and signs of stress”.

Meanwhile, Initio Parfums Privés’s Paragon parfum (£240, 3), combines a palo santo accord with notes of sage, lavender and black pepper to create a woody, spicy aroma. “Palo santo is a feelgood ingredient, creating a sense of relaxation to align mind, body and soul,” says Initio’s global brand director Bérengère Batalla. It’s a similar story in Tom Ford’s Ébène Fumé (£265, 4), a smoky, rich and leathery blend in the brand’s Enigmatic Woods collection, featuring a top note of synthetic palo santo. “I wanted a scent that captured a meditative feeling. It has an almost spiritual sensuality that uplifts your mood,” explains Ford.

Burning palo santo sticks to release the “woody, earthy” scent enhances its aromatherapy qualities, says Harriet Emily, sound bath and meditation expert at Harrods Wellness Clinic. It’s important to “practise with respect, awareness and consideration to the ancient shamanic healing traditions of Central and South America”, she adds, but it’s also an excellent way to “change or to cleanse your energy”. Who wouldn’t benefit from a little of that? ■HTSI



Left: totems by Clementine Maconachie. Above right and below: sculptures by Celia Lindsell from her Totem collection



exotic seed pods from all over the world. “The fusion of natural fertility symbols within a phallic object takes people by surprise,” she admits. She also takes on personal commissions. “People want to express where they are in their lives and also invest in pieces that just look great in an interior or in a garden.”

**CLEMENTINE MACONACHIE WAS AN** Olympic athlete before illness curtailed her sporting career. She came to totems after making sculptural pieces for window displays at the fashion boutique Sass & Bide in her native Sydney. Sculpting is now a full-time practice, with the artist represented by galleries in Houston, Texas and Richeldis Fine Art in London. “I begin with a steel stand that I build from scratch and then shape each block of Hebel Stone by hand,” says Maconachie of the soft, smooth stone she uses to make tall, elegant shapes that appear like abstracted human forms or primitive deities. “As I make each block I balance them on the stand, and the next shape just makes sense.”

The simple childhood pursuit of piling up twigs and rocks may also help to explain the appeal. “Placing one stone on top of another is a very instinctive process,” says Paiva, who studied art history and archaeology at the Sorbonne, “and I now see my child doing the same thing – it is a primary reaction to nature.” She was working in theatre design in Buenos Aires, as well as making pieces for the Hermès store’s Artist Window, when she felt compelled to create something more permanent than paper dioramas. She sees totems as still offering potent functions today. “They offer points of congregation as well as a way of signposting, to show you a path.” Infinitely varied in their vertical shape, their mystery remains compelling. ■HTSI

NAMASOLE NABABINGE, MOTHER OF KING NAKIBINGE FROM THE KUCHU ROYAL FAMILY OF BUGANDA, 2021, BY LEILAH BABIRYE



corporate life in the city and became an artist, making pieces that speak to environmental issues, unity and female power. “I like the tradition of totems being a gathering spot for ceremonies and a place for community meetings,” says Baker, whose textile *Earth Totems* were exhibited at the Saatchi Gallery last autumn; she sees her own ones as potent spiritual symbols. Her *Luna Woman Power Totem*, made from metal and LED lights, stands 3.5m tall and is positioned in Palmers Green, Enfield, where in 1914 a group of suffragettes held a landmark meeting campaigning for the right to vote.

Heinemann became fascinated by sacred spaces while travelling in Peru; back in Cape Town, she began making pieces in semi-precious stones, bronze and ceramic that got bigger and more ambitious as she combined giant pieces of sodalite or jadeite with bronze casts of