



LIVING LARGE

At his idyllic home in the Dominican Republic, Oscar de la Renta tells OLIVIA STREN how his latest scent is his approach to life, encapsulated in a bottle.

THE SETTING FOR DE LA RENTA'S INTERVIEWS



A pink sun sets in Punta Cana, and the light spills like rose brut champagne through Oscar de la Renta's coral-stone Palladian manse. The 79-year-old couturier, a monarch in his tropical court, strolls about his open-air seaside terrace, wearing a mahogany suntan and a white, breezy button-down that looks like it's been woven from a wisp of passing Caribbean cloud. He and his wife, Annette, trade double kisses and bon mots with a covey of be-gowned international journalists (all women). They both pause between sips of champagne to scratch Olivia, one of their seven dogs, behind the ears. Supermodel-slender, the canine lounges on a cushiony chaise with her Bambi-like front paws delicately crossed, as if posing for a cover shoot with Mario Testino.

We're here to celebrate the launch of Live in Love (from \$62, at the Bay), Oscar de la Renta's new fragrance, the first since the de la Renta family reclaimed the brand in December 2009. Even the sea beyond—now accoutred by the moon with a diamond-pavé sash—looks dressed for the occasion. The name of the fragrance is fresh and elegant; it was inspired by a saying Oscar de la Renta's ateliers director Raffaele Ilardo had tattooed on his arm during a trip to Bali. Opening with notes of ginger orchid, green muguet and bergamot, the fragrance claims a floral heart of jasmine sambac, rose and orange flower. "It's not 'live in love' with one person," says de la Renta. "It's live in love with life, with

your environment, with the things that make your life wonderful."

For de la Renta, the name also seems to serve as a prescription for life in general. Over dinner, a procession of salads and Chinese chicken (which he feeds to Olivia under the table) served on a mile-long table (which has seen the likes of the Clintons and the Kissingers), de la Renta stands up and breaks passionately into song: "To all the girls I've loved before!" he begins in a surprisingly velvety baritone.

"Oh, Oscar, don't be so obnoxious," says Annette, covering her face.

"OK," he concedes, amending the lyrics. "To all the girls who've loved my dresses."

De la Renta, a preternatural showman, has all the romantic grandeur and scene-stealing majesty of those well-loved dresses. He proceeds to serenade his wife over a dulce de leche dessert with a rendition of Elvis Presley's "Fools Rush In." He is no rookie at the grand gesture: To propose to Annette, he booked a Spanish palace, the Alhambra. "I made not 200, but at least 25 phone calls," he recalls. "I organized to go to the Alhambra at night—just the two of us, no one else. There I would ask her: Will you marry me?" (Sadly, his plans were foiled as Annette, a day before the planned proposal, was forced to leave Spain for a personal emergency.)

The Alhambra remains unforgettable, not just for that romantic debacle, but for its fragrance: "The smell of the [palace] is so magical, especially at night. You've never seen roses or jasmine that smell so extraordinary," says de la Renta. Although he launched his first fragrance, Oscar, in 1977, he has forever been fascinated with scent. "Children are full of curiosities. As a child, in my mind, I thought that if I got up very early in the morning and collected all the dew drops [from the flowers], I could make perfume." When I point out that most little boys—or girls, for that matter—aren't busy plotting ways of fashioning fragrance, he's quick to clarify: "I was thinking with a commercial mind too. I wanted to sell it to my mother and to my [six] sisters." And regarding the importance of the brand now being family-owned, he says slowly: "There is nothing more important in life than being in control of your destiny. And fragrance is part of my destiny."

Growing up in Santo Domingo, de »

PHOTOGRAPHY: DE LA RENTA BY ANDREAS LASZLO KONRATH/TRUNK ARCHIVE; BOTTLE BY CARLO MENDOZA



THE WRITER AND DESIGNER IN DE LA RENTA'S GARDEN

la Renta didn't always imagine fashion design as part of his destiny. "I wasn't born with a vocation. First of all, I come from a country where there's no tradition in fashion. I was never exposed to it," he continues. "And if I had told my father that I wanted to be a fashion designer, he would have dropped dead on the spot." Instead, he wanted to move to Paris to become a painter. "But for financial reasons, going to Paris, for my parents, was like going to Sodom and Gomorrah."

He settled on Spain, a more affordable option, where he eventually landed an apprenticeship with Cristóbal Balenciaga. He recalls that time, the bewildered island boy in a big world. "When we are young, we want to fly from our own wings. I was dying to get away. And then, I did. I arrived in Spain so anxious to know what the world was all about," he says. "One day, I went to a party, there were boys and girls, and they started to pass around this white powder. I asked my friend, 'Why are they passing around talcum powder?' My friend said, 'Don't be stupid. That's cocaine.' I was terrified. I hid behind the sofa and crawled out of the apartment."

The next morning, a leisurely de la Renta in loafers, walking shorts and a hibiscus-pink piqué polo sits on a sofa on his multi-columned terrace, clearly at ease in that big world he met so long ago. Lunch—a multi-course feast featuring freshly caught lobster and watermelon sorbet—awaits us as the sun is busy sprinkling sequins on a breeze-frilled

turquoise sea. De la Renta believes much of his success comes by grace of his connection to—and love for—his roots. In fact, love comes up constantly during our chat: love for Spain, for his wife, for his dogs, for fly fishing and for Quebec's Gaspé Peninsula, where he and his wife have a "fishing cabin." (Translation: The couple owns 20,000 acres of land, 20 kilometres of private river and the former home of the Marquess of Lorne, one of the first Governors General of Canada and husband to Queen Victoria's daughter, Princess Louise.) He also talks about the colour of love itself: "People think of love as pink or red, but love has much more to do with green." Following that logic, his gardens are a sea of love: mapped with orchid nurseries, bird of paradise flowers, spouting fountains, towering succulents and groves of prickly pear, grapefruit and starfruit trees—all in ever-shifting shades of green, ranging from apple to emerald to kelly.

He reflects on the distinction between fashion and fragrance: "A dress is a fancy of the day. A fragrance is a projection of yourself," he says. "You can go to a store and look at a dress—it's visual. You like the dress or don't. If you don't, I can come and tell you a story. I'll say, 'Hold it! You don't like it? Well, let me tell you that this dress is made from the most unbelievable silk that comes from the Himalayas, from butterfly wings.' I could tell you the most extraordinary story. But the fact remains that your first impression is what counts. A fragrance is different—it's invisible. It's the romance of the story. But above all, it's about your own emotional involvement."

During a post-lunch tour of the garden with de la Renta (which feels vaguely like getting a tour of Eden by God himself), he picks a bay leaf. "Smell is the longest remembered of all the senses," he says. As we say our farewells in the foyer, I hear the designer proclaim, "Oh, Olivia, you are lovely! What a beauty!" Startled, I turn around. The scent of embarrassment is also memorable. He was talking to his dog. □