

August 17-23, 2014

LEADER OF THE PACK

The woman driving Tame Impala

PARENT TRAP

Are you playing favourites?

DONNA HAY

The creamiest caramel slice

STM
S
THE SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE

Making SCENTS

How a WA cattleman steered Tina Arena into the heady world of perfume

Scents of purpose

Singer Tina Arena's first foray into perfume has put her in an unlikely partnership with an earthy WA cattle farmer and the grandson of French cosmetics house founder Yves Rocher.

Tina Arena was just a tot when she first became fascinated with fragrance. She recalls accidentally breaking her mother's only bottle of a cherished perfume, at age four. Long after the bottle had gone, it wasn't the fragrance that lingered with her, but the memory of her mother's distress at the loss.

By age nine, and already a child star, Arena was under the spell of the perfumes of Jean Patou, whose French fashion and perfume house was behind fragrances such as the 1930s scent Joy. Arena admits that to this day it is the elegance of old-world fragrances that continue to hold her attention.

"I love old smells," she says.

Still, it took a rough-around-the-edges West Australian cattle farmer to persuade her to turn her love of fragrance into something more – her own perfume. Stephen Birkbeck spent more than two years persuading her to create a fragrance for a WA company he heads, Atlas Pearls and Perfumes.

Add to the mix Nelson Rocher, a grandson of famous French cosmetics house founder Yves Rocher, who for the moment is calling Perth home, and the perfume is shaping up as a

heady concoction. Such is Atlas's faith in the outcome, the company – which now counts Arena and Rocher among its shareholders – is spending a million dollars on it.

"It's a very interesting relationship," Arena

says. "I've been in the music industry for nearly 40 years and I've never lent my name to any product or brand before."

What convinced her, she says, apart from Birkbeck's enthusiasm, was his integrity and the quality of what he was proposing.

The perfume being worked on, with a team of 25 French experts, is likely to be launched in February, first in France, where Arena is as much a household name as in Australia (and where she received the French equivalent of a knighthood in 2009), and then on home soil.

Arena, who is travelling Australia performing her Reset Tour, says creating a perfume hasn't been too different from making an album.

"There's not a lot of difference," she says. "It's a process where I'm able to be creative ... I'm quite relaxed about it. It's a beautiful process. I feel very supported. My voice is heard, my opinion, my taste. The way I perceive things is really taken into consideration."

Just how Birkbeck, who has a 200ha cattle farm in WA's South-West and, bizarrely, some extraordinary contacts within the European cosmetics world, came to convince Arena to help him make a perfume is another chapter in the colourful businessman's life.

He says that when he invited Arena and her husband, French artist Vince Mancini, to join him and his wife Karen for dinner at the uber-chic Hotel Costes in Paris about 2½ years ago, he wasn't even familiar with her music.

Birkbeck remembers: "When we had that

dinner she said, 'Do you know my music, Steve?' I said, 'Nah, I don't. I wouldn't have a clue.' I have a very limited music knowledge and it's called the '70s.

"She said, 'If we're going to do this, you're going to come to a concert.' And she invited me to the Symphony of Life concert in Sydney and we didn't know what to expect. We went to the party afterwards.

"Everyone was wearing ties and elegantly dressed and in their jewels. I thought, 'Wow, that's aligned with luxury.'"

Birkbeck, who farmed emus in his younger days, has been doing business with luxury French brands since the '80s and '90s, exporting first leather fashion and then sandalwood from the Mt Romance sandalwood farm he founded at Kent River in WA's south (it is now owned by TFS Corp which paid \$30 million for it in 2008).

"In '98 I approached the largest perfume manufacturer in the world, Givaudan, in their Paris headquarters and said I could provide them with sandalwood oil," Birkbeck says of Mt Romance.

"It took five years. In 2002 we won Opium with Yves Saint Laurent, then Dior, Lauder – all the names started to fall in, and that business we sold in 2005 (for \$19.5 million)."

But the biggest jewel in the crown of the outback entrepreneur was yet to come – one that would make him the toast of the international beauty world. In 2008, he delivered a presentation at the world's first congress on ethics in beauty in Grasse on the French Riviera, considered the world's capital of perfume.

His call for ethics and sustainability in the billion-dollar beauty business was embraced and led to the establishment of The Presidents Circle, an influential ethics body that Birkbeck founded with Rocher's father Jacques, who he counts among his friends. It was also backed by Clarins, Chanel, Hermes and Estee Lauder as well as other beauty giants.

Birkbeck admits he's had a "parallel universe in France that's been quite unheralded". Now planning to bow out of commercial life, he hopes with the Arena perfume to first plant the seeds of an Australian perfume industry.

"I want to create a luxury brand," he says.

"No one has done that in Australia."

Still, money aside, Birkbeck says it is the artistic endeavour that interests him the most.

"I know I'm here as the CEO of a stock exchange company, but it was always the artistic endeavour for me and that was always what drove me to want to have discussions with Tina," he says.

On July 18 this year, Atlas announced that Nelson Rocher, the son of Birkbeck's friend Jacques and an heir to the Rocher family fortune, had been appointed an alternate director to Birkbeck, who is Atlas chairman and CEO. The young Rocher has also taken up a shareholding in Atlas.

In France, his family's name is synonymous with that country's No. 1 beauty brand and the global empire founded by his grandfather in 1959. The young Frenchman has been living in Perth for six months and working with Arena on the perfume. He says he first met Birkbeck in 2010 when he and his father came to WA to plant

trees as part of the United Nations Plants for the Planet project his father supports. At the time, he was working for his family's company. As a product development manager, he has expertise in products, branding and marketing.

"I met Steve and I saw a passionate guy with a lot of ideas, with a lot of energy and I wanted to be a part of the Atlas story," Rocher says. "I truly believe in the perfume."

He might be still grappling with the rules of AFL, but he's adapted easily to WA's lifestyle.

"I'm going back and forth between Paris and Australia every two or three months, so it's not hard at all," he says. "It's a good opportunity for me being part of a new culture, state of mind, new people, everything is new."

Though he spent four years making fragrances in Europe, he'd never worked with a star before.

"What is good with Tina is she is not just the artist who puts her name on the bottle and it's done," he says.

The perfume is just the start. Arena is already signed on to design a pearl jewellery collection for Atlas (the company has pearl farms in South-East Asia and already has a jewellery line).

She's knocked back a seat on the Atlas board because of music commitments, but Birkbeck hopes she will become Atlas's creative director.

He is a big fan of her taste and career.

"I've won every award in export," he says. "I'm the most decorated farmer in the country in terms of exports, but if you compare what Tina has done ... Tina uses a word when you don't have music backing you, a capella."

With the perfume on track, Arena says she's just starting to turn her attention to the jewellery line – and pearls are another of her passions.

"There is something incredibly beautiful about reinventing the pearl," she says. And also, it seems, about creating a luxury line.

"As much as I love music," she says, "I'm enjoying being able to diversify with this collaboration, taking it one step at a time."



Arena in concert.

In business: Nelson
Rocher and Stephen
Birkbeck.



Look at Chanel, Hermes. You've got to be doing at least a couple of million dollars to be considered a global brand. No one has done that in Australia