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PASSIONS

## The glow's still golden

*Creativity is keeping pace with a burning desire for high-end candles. Heard about the flame-free version?*

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The candle craze, unlike the velour sweat suit or Tae Bo, has turned out to be more like a trick birthday candle: Just when you could swear it's finally out, the flame sputters back to life. And before you know it, the latest hand-poured, exotically fragranced creation has found its way onto your credit-card statement.

It costs a stunning \$50 for about the same number of burn hours. Or maybe it's \$1,000, the going rate for those 5-foot-tall fire hazards that purportedly burn for six years. Six years? Surely the power would be turned back on by then.

But even the longest wick can't outlive the current high-end candle obsession which, like lattes, gives every evidence of being a fad that has no intention of passing.

Self-styled candle designers have become as ubiquitous as yoga instructors. Suddenly, it seems as if Los Angeles has become the epicenter for the independent candle maker, a place where struggling actresses and frustrated financiers are turning garages and spare bedrooms into fledgling votive factories. Each season, these entrepreneurs create new candles that occasionally compete with industry titans such as Diptyque and help keep the \$2-billion-a-year industry alive. Business partners Alex Connelly, Ryan Eberle and Bill Johns built home theaters for four years before devoting their careers to inventing what amounts to a decaffeinated candle. Made of wax in a variety of colors and fragrances, the Candle Safe is a fire-free creation that uses a battery-fueled 3-watt bulb shaped like a flame. A computer chip embedded in the wax controls the flicker frequency with three speeds. Forget wondering if you snuffed out every tea light as you board a plane or cursing wicks that break when you've burned only \$10 worth of a \$70 Rigaud candle.

"How many times have you been in a bar and you knock a candle over?" asks Eberle, who said the sharp rise in candle-ignited fires inspired the invention. The product hit stores a little over a year ago. Earlier this month the Costa Mesa-based company sold upward of 800 Candle Safes, which go for about \$44 each in six minutes of QVC time. Madisyn Taylor found another entry point into a saturated market with soy candles, the healthy alternative to the more common smoke- and particulate-emitting paraffin wax. The former interior decorator started her eponymous line in Hollywood almost two years ago, making about 100 candles per month in clean-smelling fragrances such as grapefruit and lavender. According to Taylor, the hand-poured, all-natural candles with cotton wicks have aromatherapy qualities, but "it's just to create a mood. They're not going to cure eczema."

Taylor sells about 5,000 units a month to boutiques such as Candle Delirium, a new candle shop in West Hollywood. On Santa Monica Boulevard amid scruffy liquor stores and high-gloss shops, Candle Delirium's customers include newly arrived actors looking to spruce up their studio apartments with \$2 votives and homeowners who couldn't fathom a dinner party without \$300 worth of pillar candles clustered on the mantel.

"I thought I was a candle-fetish guy," says owner Anthony Carro, who worked in finance and as a gym manager before opening the 1,800-square-foot space this fall. "Now I'm realizing that almost everyone considers themselves a candle freak."

The title would apply nicely to Leigh Gilbert, a voice-over teacher who has made it difficult for Carro to keep items such as pumpkin spice-smelling votives in stock. "I go into the store and I try to buy a gift for someone and come out with 10 for me," says Gilbert, who has at least a dozen candles burning in her one-bedroom West Hollywood apartment every evening. "I've already spent about \$500 there in five trips."

Rachel Ashwell, founder of the Shabby Chic empire that specializes in a kind of slip-covered romance, never has fewer than 35 candles -- and sometimes as many as 70 -- burning in her garden and home every night. "I do it just for myself," says the British-born designer. "It's not like throwing flower petals on your bed. It's a way of bringing some romance very subtly in your life without feeling stupid."

At Timothy Jay, a Parisian-style West Hollywood candle shop, owner Tim Sullivan creates personalized candles, or "private pours" as they're known, for everyone from New York socialite-decorator Bunny Williams to L.A. saxophonist Dave Koz. "We can do everything from creating a unique fragrance down to the packaging," says Sullivan. "It's a tasteful way to promote yourself." Starting cost? It's \$1,000 for about five dozen of your very own candles, which includes a consultation session with Sullivan but not, at that entry-level price, an original fragrance or the packaging.

Interior designer David Brian Sanders went for the VIP option last holiday season and had Sullivan design a uniquely scented, labeled and boxed celadon candle to give to clients and friends. This year, he's gone for an all-white floral-scented creation that slips into a white box with a white and silver label that bears Sanders' name in the same font used in his logo. "I used to send baskets and flowers," says the L.A.-based decorator, "but I got tired of that and I felt that this was a more up-to-date gift. You can never have enough candles."

When industry vet Robin Coe-Hutshing launched her own candle collection this fall, she was less interested in branding her business, Studio at Fred Segal, the Santa Monica beauty emporium to the stars, and more focused on creating the Rolls-Royce of luminaries. Coe-Hutshing is as close to a candle connoisseur as you can get, and for the past decade she's been the city's ultimate supplier for people

who have graduated from a \$23 Illume Vanilla Icing pillar and moved on to, say, a \$49 Catherine Memmi tea-scented creation.

This fall she added Burn, her own line, to the mix. "I spent two years developing the fragrance with the same quality that you'd use in eau de parfum. They're subtle but they're unbelievably strong," says Coe-Hutshing. The \$55 candles sold out at Barneys New York in the first three weeks and are outselling the competition at Studio.

To every person career-changing into the world of wax and wick, Lynette Reed represents the pinnacle of success. The struggling actress founded Illume Candles in 1994 with an initial investment of \$10,000, and was one of the first to expand the fragrance frenzy into such uncharted scents as pomegranate and honeysuckle. Her tiny shop, located on a now-trendy stretch of West 3rd Street in Los Angeles, became a mecca for early candle addicts. In 1998 she sold the company to industry giant Illuminations for "several million dollars."

Her story is the candle equivalent of late '90s tech stocks, and according to Reed, the bubble has burst. But even though she insists that the days of "easy money" peddling candles are over, you'd never know it at the 700-square-foot store that she founded well before it was cool to be a candle designer. Day and night, it still bustles as shoppers wade through an olfactory assault of musk and patchouli, and next year's candle makers peruse the competition.

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Careful with that old flame

While candle sales are on the rise, so are house fires started by them, according to the National Fire Protection Assn. Moreover, candle fires are more common around the holidays, peaking on Christmas Day. The most common cause? Candles left unattended. Here are the best ways to contain the flame:

Don't leave candles outdoors overnight. If exposed to moisture, they may not relight. Water that becomes overheated and trapped by wax can cause wax to spatter or explode.

Keep candles away from all flammable objects. Don't place them in windows where curtains can reach them. Never place candles on or near Christmas trees.

Never use a candle as a light source when checking pilot lights or fueling equipment.

Don't use a candle when looking for something in a confined space.

Avoid clustering pillar candles too close. Keep them at least 3 inches away from one another.

Use candleholders that are sturdy, won't tip over easily and won't be knocked over by children or pets.

Always burn candles on a heat-resistant surface.

Always put votives in a container.

Place candles away from drafts, but keep in mind that they should only be used in well-ventilated rooms.

Always keep a burning candle in sight.

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Wicks and wax

Properly caring for candles can add to their life and make them burn better and more evenly. Some tips:

Keep wicks trimmed to 1/4 inch and centered for even burning. Long wicks let the flame get too high, causing candles to smoke and blacken glass containers.

To prevent heat damage to surfaces, don't use a candle when 1/2 inch of wax remains in a container or 2 inches remain of a pillar.

Refrigerate candles before using them so they burn more slowly and evenly. Cover with plastic wrap or foil before refrigerating to prevent wicks from absorbing moisture.

Rotate pillar candles occasionally to avoid uneven burning from drafts.

Use a fine mesh stocking and a dab of salad oil to polish wax candles and rub out scratches.

To loosen wax from glass containers, put them in the freezer for 15 to 30 minutes. This causes wax to shrink and pop out.

Don't extinguish candles with water. The water can cause the hot wax to spatter and can cause glass containers to break.

To remove spilled wax, let it harden, then cover with a brown paper bag and press gently with a warm iron. The wax will absorb into the paper.

Each time you light a pillar candle, let it burn long enough to create a pool of wax across most of the diameter of the candle (about two hours). The candle will last longer and burn more evenly.

Keep candles out of sunlight to prevent fading.