Follow your nose

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Wine writer Andrew Jefford travels to Paris on a mission to understand perfume.

SCENT AND EMOTION GO HAND IN HAND. CHILDHOOD MEMORIES are often a chain of recollected smells. It is scent, too, that endows the sexual rituals that define adulthood with their sometimes frightening power; the appositely perfumed seducer or seductrice is the hardest to resist. Touch, sight and sound are external senses, whereas smells inhabit us. Taste is the only other sense to be internalised to the same extent, and what we call "taste" is largely composed of aroma molecules perceived in the olfactory bulb (the same part of the brain that registers smell). No wonder perfume is big business.

Like every other human activity, though, it is changing. "I've been in fine fragrance for more than 20 years now," says perfumer Michel Girard, of Paris-based Quest International, "and over the past five years, it's gone mad. Growth nowadays only comes from novelty." In the old days, a patient, painterly perfumer such as the celebrated Edmond Roudnitska could afford to take three years to create Diorissimo, four to compound Madame Rochas, or seven to nose his way towards Eau Sauvage for Christian Dior. Nowadays, most perfumes are put out to competitive tender by their brand owners, and Quest and its three main competitors – IFF (International Flavours and Fragrances), Givaudan-Roure and Firmenich – scramble to produce fragrances that might fit the brief and win the business.

Girard gets between 24 hours ("which is ridiculous") and two weeks to come up with some options and, if he wins the project, it will probably have to be ready in six months. "Being a perfumer is now a loser's job. I am a lucky perfumer, which means I win on a regular basis. But even so, out of every 100 projects I pitch for, I am going to lose 96 or 97. It's very stressful."

On the day I visited, Girard had about 20 briefs to work on; he showed me the one on the top of the pile. There was a sheet of descriptive text, most of it in French, some of which was useless. "It says 'creative', for example. They all want you to be 'creative'; it's funny how they never ask for something 'middle-of-the-road'. But at the same time, you know that they also want something that will test well on 200 people. Most consumers are very conventional and, if you do produce something really creative, most of those people in the test will not like it."

Other terms, though, he found more useful – châleur du sud ("southern heat: fig leaf, perhaps"), influence hispanique ("I've lived in Spain – orange flowers, maybe dama de noce, which is night-flowering jasmine"), gaîté ("happiness – that tells me it needs to be floral, fresh, sparkling, not oriental"), la fête ("celebration, lots of colour, lots of laughter, nothing too heavy"). The written brief is followed by four sheets of surreal visuals: shells, taffeta, a flamenco dancer, flashes of movement. "It's a pretty good brief; there is lots of coherence in what they are explaining."

Another key area of change in modern perfumery concerns the ingredients themselves. When the Italian Gian Paolo Feminis began to produce his "aqua mirabilis" in cologne in 1693, he used only natural ingredients such as lemon, orange, bergamot, rosemary and neroli oil. Today, about 70 per cent of most perfumes are based on synthetic ingredients. "A perfumer has around 5,000 possible notes he can use to create fragrances with," says Jean-Michel Duriez, chief "nose" for the grand old Parisian perfume house of Jean Patou, "and, of those, at most 300 are natural."

This is certainly a revolution, although most perfumers point out that it is a very slow one. The first synthetics were used by Houbigant in 1882 when he used coumarin in his Fougère Royale and, more famously, by Aimé Guerlain who used vanillin in the vivacious Jicky of 1889; what every student of perfume quickly learns is that a hallmark of Chanel's No 5 (created by Ernest Beaux in 1921) is not so much its complex floral composition as the great whack of synthetic aldehyde which gives it its distinctive sheen and lift.

What has changed more recently, though, is that styles have moved away from the heaviness and tenacity of past perfumes, and that the vastly expanded wealth of synthetics has made many non-floral profiles and characters possible. The fresh marine scents, for example, which are the hallmark of the immensely successful Eau d'Issey as well as others such as Calvin Klein's Escape or Kenzo Pour Homme, are only possible thanks to the invention of synthetics such as calone or helional. Many modern perfumes, too, are marked by what the French call notes "gourmandes", or "food notes"; again synthetics have allowed these notes to rival classic floral ones.

Perhaps the most famous perfume in this recent tradition is Angel created in 1992 by Olivier Cresp of Quest for Thierry Mugler. The brief was to summon up Mugler's childhood memories of going with his mother to the funfair, hence the perfume's caramel, candy floss and toffee-apple notes (attributable to a synthetic called veltol). Are synthetics cheating? "What is a rose?" asks Girard in reply. "A rose is a little chemical factory; it contains at least 300 chemical substances. All the chemists have done is separate out some of those components for us, enabling us to amplify certain parts of the natural world." "The issue of synthetics and naturals is a false problem," agrees Isabelle Doyen, of Annick Goutal. As well as being the "nose" for Goutal, Doyen teaches at France's leading perfume school at Versailles. "Perfumery actually became interesting at the moment synthetics began to appear at the end of the 19th century. Before that, you had some pretty floral things, and you had animal things, which could be a bit heavy."

"When synthetics became available, suddenly the perfume world was a much bigger and more interesting place. It's also wrong to assume that synthetics mean 'cheap'. Chemists have managed to isolate the principal element of iris roots, called irone. It costs twice as much as iris itself."

A third change is that formulae have become simpler. In the past, most perfumes contained at least 200 components; nowadays, 50 to 60 is closer to the norm. Often, too, a principal ingredient is allowed to take the lead note, and this is often reflected in the perfume's name – such as Annick Goutal's Gardénia Passion, Elizabeth Arden's Green Tea, or some of the disturbingly provocative aromas created by Serge Lutens (with the help of Englishman Chris Sheldrake) for Shiseido in Paris: the shimmering Un Lys, the rooty Iris Silver Mist or the troubling, haunting, almost oppressive Muscs Koublai Khan. This single-flower approach (known in French as "soliflores") marks a return to distant tradition, though: Molinard's Rose and Jasmin were 19th-century favourites, and the great perfume house of Caron has punctuated the 20th century with Narcisse Noir (1912), Gardénia (1925), and Le Muguet du Bonheur (1952).

How sensorially exhausting is the work of a perfumer, and to what extent does it resemble the work of other professional sensualists – such as wine tasters? Doyen's creative days slip by in two small rooms off a mansion courtyard in Paris's 17th arrondissement. One room, the office, is full of postcards, photographs, CDs (Paco de Lucia is at the top of the pile) and books (including Borges' The Aleph and The Book of Sand).

Next door is her perfumer's "organ": a tiny racked amphitheatre of 300 or so little bottles containing the "notes", the aromatic building blocks of perfume. At its centre are electronic scales (the formulae are written out in units of one hundredth of a gram) – and a postcard detail of the Mona Lisa's hands. "We need relaxing and beautiful things like that," says Doyen.

The work is carried out by dipping strips of paper ("mouillettes") into the tiny bottles and clipping them on to a stand ("porte- mouillette") – and smelling. Endlessly. First thing in the morning; last thing at night (she breaks up the sessions with admin, plus the odd walk). Her compounds then get tested on her own skin, and on that of family, friends, and friends of friends; at the weekends and on holiday. "A nose is never on holiday. Sometimes it's a bit tiring. One is perpetually in quest. It's a sort of attentiveness. Do we live more fully than ordinary people? Perhaps, yes."

Is having such a sensitive nose sometimes a disadvantage? "Going to the cinema and sitting down next to someone who is bathed in a perfume I don't like, that's difficult. Or the métro. People who've lunched on garlic and onions, that's impossible."

She also feels that the world is becoming over-scented. "I think it's a shame, especially for children. I would prefer children to have in their memory bank the aroma of a well-polished parquet, or of a good cake just out of the oven, or the smell of dust and wood in a cupboard, rather than the smell of a toilet deodoriser or cleaning fluid or a scented candle."

"Probably the most obvious link between wine and perfume is language," says Girard, who as well as being a perfumer is a keen wine collector. "We both lack one."

There is no direct way to describe scents, but in the perfume world, just like the wine world, the past decade has seen a torrent of allusion and metaphor pour out of journalists and marketers as they try to do some sort of verbal justice to the pleasure of a scent or flavour.

It's no accident, though, that most perfume advertisements still use image rather than text. "The main difference between wine and perfume," Girard continues, "is that wine has a 'terroir' whereas perfume doesn't." Great wine, in other words, aspires to smell and taste as it does because of its precise geographical origins, which is why France's leading winemakers often describe themselves as midwives rather than creators.

Perfumers are altogether more ambitious since (brief aside) they can do more or less anything they want. "It's like being God, in a way," says Quest's new star Francis Kurkdjian. "You start from nothing, and you create something."

"It is an incredible journey," says Doyen, thinking about the ten years she took to create a rose-pear scent eventually emerged as Ce Soir Ou Jamais. "It's like walking up a mountain: it's a joy and a torture at the same time. We had such a perfect idea of what we wanted that we weren't prepared to make a concession and have something that we only half-liked. Even then, I think we can still do better. The obsession is still there."