

MASTERCLASS

HOW I LEARNED TO THINK THROUGH *my nose*

It won't just help you understand perfume better – a fragrance masterclass can change your life in ways you never imagined, discovers Kim Parker

I have a confession to make. Though I've been a beauty journalist for over 12 years, am fascinated by the alchemical art of perfumery and can certainly talk the talk about top notes (the first notes you smell in a perfume's composition), juice (the stuff inside a perfume bottle) and sillage (a perfume's trail) without much prompting, when it comes to interpreting an actual fragrance for myself, I'm definitely more apprentice than master. While other editors at perfume launches have been sent into paroxysms of pleasure over the pepperiness of a Bulgarian rose note or the erotic quality of a hint of jasmine, I have often sniffed the very same scent and thought, 'That's nice. What is that... flowers?'

That is, until recently. Determined to heighten my sense of smell, I sought advice from trusted experts, including perfumers, bloggers and fellow beauty editors, and put their tips into practice for myself. Being in the industry, I may have a vested interest in having a keener nose, but there are other life-enhancing reasons to want one, too. On a biological level, our sense of smell is intricately linked to our sense of taste so a better nose invariably leads to a more sensitive palette (need proof? Hold your nose the next time you eat something. 'Bland' just doesn't quite capture the sensation). It could even, if science journal *Biological Psychology* is to be believed, be the key to finding true love – the theory being that people with a poor sense of smell lack the confidence



and sense of adventure needed to find a mate. Science aside, a more discerning nose can certainly lead to greater pleasures when it comes to perfume. As with wine, being able to speak confidently and knowledgeably about fragrance with your friends can be enormously gratifying, as is the ability to sniff out a special new scent for yourself in a crowded beauty hall, unmoved by either brand name or bottle design (though both are lovely extras). In short, I've found a whole world of new olfactory opportunities has opened up since I raised my scent awareness. Here's how I did it...

Week one

These days, we rarely engage our sense of smell except, perhaps, to see if the milk's gone off or we've left the gas on. The neural pathways in our brain that relate to smell have shrunk since the primal days when we relied on odours more heavily to survive. The good news? It's absolutely possible to rebuild them.

'Start by smelling everything around you. Sniff your coffee, your glass of wine, your body lotion, your tomato salad,' says blogger-turned-perfumer Denyse Beaulieu, who found the technique heightened her own scent >>

awareness. Before long, you'll start doing it automatically and reinvigorate those weedy neural pathways, smelling things you may not have smelled before.

A word of warning: after a week of 'conscious smelling', you may start noticing all kinds of awful reeks alongside the pleasant whiffs in your life. For me, it was the oily, fetid stink of the dog fox at the end of my road and the sour-sick coffee breath of nearby commuters on the Tube. But it was a small price to pay for all the unexpected pleasures I started noticing, too, like my mother's night-blooming jasmine and the caramel-like sweetness of my boyfriend's neck.

Week two

Once you've upped your awareness of smells, try familiarising yourself with two or three different ones and smelling them a few times a day. Lyn Harris, the perfumer who founded Miller Harris fragrances and has a new niche brand called Perfumer H, recommends picking scents from the major fragrance families – a citrus, a floral and a woody scent, perhaps. As you sniff them, note the differences between them – how the citrus are fizzy and zesty, for example, while the florals are sweet and the woody scents are earthy.

'It's how perfumers begin learning about the major fragrance families,' says Harris. 'Not only that, but by training your brain to detect the differences between these scents, rather than simply being aware of them, you're helping to sharpen your sense of smell more acutely.'

Week three

Time to start working on scent memory. For seasoned beauty journalist Jo Fairley, founder of The Perfume Society (perfumesociety.org), an innovative perfume-sampling scheme that also hosts workshops, this can often be the trickiest part of perfume appreciation.

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'Smell is the most **EVOCATIVE** of all our senses – the one that's hot-wired directly into the **EMOTIONAL** part of our brains'

of our brains – but it's also the most frustratingly elusive,' says Fairley. 'Trying to fix a scent in your mind can feel like trying to pin down a butterfly.'

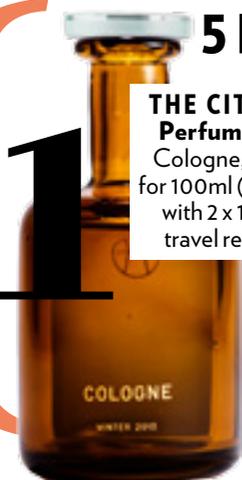
Her trick for doing just that is one that she learned from master perfumer Jacques Cavallier (who created L'Eau d'Issey for Issey Miyake) and she teaches it at all Perfume Society workshops. 'First thing in the morning, when your sense of smell is keenest, sniff a fragrance or two and write down anything that comes to mind. Textures, sensations, colours, even fabrics.

'By free-associating the smells with more familiar words and feelings, you make it easier for your mind to latch on to them. It also has the double effect of helping you to remember and articulate those scents later on,' says Fairley. It sounds simple but it works. Try keeping a little journal by your bed for all your musings – it really helps to make this a regular habit, which is key.

Week four

After a week or two of scribbling and free-associating fragrances, things should slowly start happening. For me, it was when a favourite scent, Prada's Infusion d'Iris, suddenly took on a new breadth – its powdery iris notes acquiring a cool, almost metallic edge, which I'd never picked up on before – that I noticed the change. I also became more sensitive to smells from a great distance, able to follow my nose towards hot croissants, steaming bowls of miso ramen or the Hyde Park rose garden from 100 metres away, which Jo Fairley says can often happen. And, yes, my sense of taste is getting keener, too – these days, I need to sprinkle on far less salt to extract flavour from my food. I'm a million miles from becoming a nose, but my sense of smell is still improving. If nothing happens for you, don't give up. Practice really does make perfect. And with over 1,500 new fragrances being launched each year, there's a whole scented safari out there for you to explore. ■

5 NEW PERFUMES TO START YOUR TRAINING



1 **THE CITRUS**
Perfumer H
Cologne, £175
for 100ml (comes
with 2 x 10ml
travel refills)



2 **THE ORIENTAL**
Tom Ford
Black Orchid
EDT, £45
for 30ml



3 **THE HERBAL/
FOUGERE**
Azzi Glasser
The Perfumer's
Story Old Books,
£95 for 30ml

4 **THE WOODY**
Diptyque
Benjoin Bohème
EDP, £130 for
100ml



5 **THE FLORAL**
Michael Kors
Rose
Radiant Gold
EDP, £39
for 30ml



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