

Winner—2007 Fifi

MAKING *Scents*

A REFINED SENSE OF SMELL ISN'T BORN—IT'S MADE. WITH THE HELP OF FOUR VISUALLY IMPAIRED STUDENTS, MEGAN DEEM TRIES TO BECOME A SUPERIOR SNIFFER

Allie Parrish, a ninth-grade pom squad member with dark-blond curls from Tyler, Texas, started mixing her own scents a year ago at her hometown Bath Junkie store. Parrish always stocks her purse with “eight lip glosses” and regularly applies eye shadow and mascara. “I put on clear mascara in the locker room,” she says, “but I wear black if my mom’s there to check it.” That’s because Parrish was born with Leber’s congenital amaurosis and has only about 10 percent of normal vision.

Last June, Parrish traveled 13 hours on three airplanes to Forcalquier, a town in France’s Provence region, where she joined three other legally blind aroma-obsessed U.S. high schoolers. The quartet and their parents were guests of

Olivier Baussan at a five-day fragrance seminar for visually impaired teenagers, called Provence Dans Tous Les Sens.

Baussan, the founder of L’Occitane, a Provence-based skin-care brand famous for incorporating local ingredients (such as lavender and rosemary) into its formulas, entered the world of the blind more than nine years ago, when he began labeling his products in braille. “We wanted to make our stores handicapped-accessible, something France was behind in doing,” he says. The academy, which opened in June of 1998, admits up to 10 French, American, or Polish teens, ages 14 to 16, each year to expose them to, in Baussan’s words, “the light all of these aromatic plants create. We try to open their inside window to the smell of their surroundings.”

Conventional wisdom has it that those who can’t see would be particularly gifted at blending fragrances. But “being blind doesn’t make us better perfumers,” Gael Peltier, a Paris-based “nose”

PHOTOGRAPHED BY PHILIPPE SALOMON

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and one of the Tous Les Sens instructors, tells me on the first day of class. “Most people don’t use their sense of smell. Our hearing and sense of touch aren’t inherently more acute, either. We simply pay more attention to them because we can’t see.”

LESSON PLAN

Humans can distinguish 10,000 individual odors, ranging from the warmth of freshly washed linens to the stink of a single rotting halibut in a restaurant trash bag. 2004’s Nobel Prize winners for medicine, Linda Buck, PhD, and Richard Axel, PhD, earned their trip to Sweden by showing that the nose contains approximately 1,000 innate sensors (the body’s only regenerating nerve cells). These olfactory fibers can transmit thousands of different scent codes recognizable by the brain.

Training the nose to detect the nuances of blood orange versus grapefruit takes drilling and repetition, not unlike memorizing multiplication tables in grade school. “The best way to learn fragrances is to take two raw materials that can smell the same, such as basil and tarragon, cover your eyes, and practice until you’re able to tell which is which by scent alone,” says Yann Vasnier, a perfumer in Quest International’s fine fragrances division and a nose behind Donna Karan Gold and certain Bath and Body Works aromas.

Taking your vision out of the equation will also help you choose the scent that suits you best. When she creates custom blends, perfumer Sarah Horowitz-Thran, the L.A. founder of Creative Scen-tualization, has customers close their eyes before selecting their eau’s final components. “If people see a note’s label, they say they like it based on the way they *think* they’re supposed to feel,” she says.

STUDY GROUP

Halfway through the first day, I’m wondering if I left my olfactory lobe in Manhattan. When we tour the L’Occitane headquarters, Jenny Suchan, a cheerfully inquisitive tenth grader from Potomac, Maryland, comments on the odor of surfactants in the storage area. I hadn’t noticed. During the essential oils course with Peltier, I sniff an unmarked sample of basil and think it’s anise; later, I mistake orange blossom for rosemary. Meanwhile, my fellow students are running scent circles around me. As each new bottle is passed around, they close their eyes to inhale its bouquet and guess the name. Fifteen-year-old Thane Sanzo Jr. of Mohawk, New York, is a Polo cologne fan with a new appreciation for lavender essential oil. “It keeps the French mosquitoes away,” he points out.

Like his younger brother, Sanzo was born blind due to the hereditary Norrie disease; an uncle and two cousins are also afflicted. His passion is classic rock ’n’ roll (he sings Boston’s “More Than a Feeling” during study breaks), but he recognizes each aroma held beneath his nose during our body-scrub-making session. Parrish, who has been waiting to apply to Tous Les Sens since a L’Occitane store employee told her about the program four years ago, detects the rosemary plant sitting a couple feet away on a class-mate’s desk. Every single student correctly identifies the dried orange peel, which I still can’t smell, even though I’m looking right at it. I do name lavender, which is no great accomplishment—

we’re spending five days in an amethyst sea of the stuff.

Perfumers work with more than 1,500 notes. From that vast palette, about 120 consistently make it into flacons (you can probably guess a lot of them: musk, rose, amber, lemon, vanilla, and jasmine, for starters). Fragrances traditionally fall into three categories: woody *chyprés* (such as Guerlain Mitsouko, Rochas Femme, and Narciso Rodriguez For Her) whose strong patchouli base gives them an earthy sexiness; warm, sensual Orientals, which contain vanilla (see YSL Opium, Calvin Klein Obsession, and Cartier Must de Cartier); and sweet florals, like Dior Diorissimo, Estée Lauder Pleasures, and Robert Piguet Fracas.

According to Roja Dove, the owner of Roja Dove Haute Par-fumerie in London, selecting your perfect blend starts with choos-ing a family. Spray individual blotters with examples of each, write their names on the paper, then—without looking—sniff your samples until a couple of favorites remain. To arrive at your ideal eau, use new cards to whittle down options in your chosen genre.

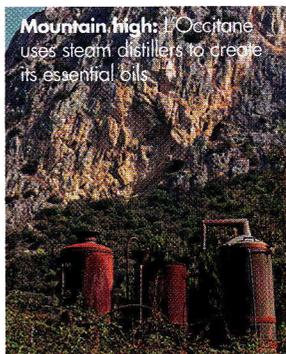
With practice, simple notes become easy to identify. Complex formulas, however, contain upward of 60 ingredients, some chemical. (Aldehyde molecules, often created in a lab, give perfume its “fresh” sensation.) A whiff of coffee beans may perk up overworked nasal passages, but experts believe that’s strictly junior varsity. They wait for alcohol to evaporate from the blotter or bite into a green apple. “Its smell and taste work on the trigeminal nerve, which runs through the nose and mouth,” says Edwige Chasselon Queffeuolou, another L’Occitane teacher. “It neutralizes an aroma’s effect on the brain.”

FINAL EXAM

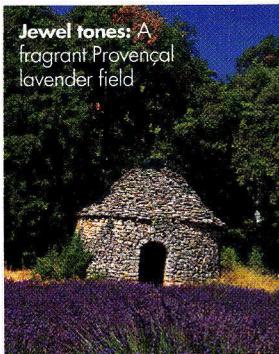
After almost a week of differentiating everything from lavender, mint, and rose to geranium, thyme, and ginger, the students were experiencing Baussan’s “light.”

“We’d heard so much about what Provence looks like, but obviously we can’t see it,” Parrish says. “These smells have given me a picture.” Parrish would like to continue her perfumery classes, as would Nikki Singh. A high school junior from Ellicott City, Maryland, Singh was able to see until she was 11, by which point numerous surgeries for congenital glaucoma were unsuccessful. “You have to learn how the actual scent molecules work,” says the straight-A student. “So I’m taking AP chemistry next year.”

Weeks later, back in New York City, my nose with its questionable abilities was still functioning at the remedial level. Granted, Manhattan is hardly ripe with Provence’s olfactory pleasures (although “ripe” describes the early-morning odor in the nightclub-saturated Meatpacking District). Then I called to mind Baussan’s advice: “You have to see with more than your eyes, and you must smell with more than your nose; you need to use your inside.” So I slowed down and took educational opportunities where I found them, shutting my eyes and focusing on the aromas I was inhaling: fresh lilies in a vase on my coffee table, papaya salsa garnishing my chicken dinner, geranium and mandarin orange perfuming my shampoo. Being observant, I learned, isn’t only noticing the things that enter your field of vision; it’s also about realizing what’s right under your nose. □



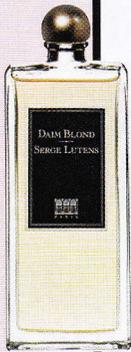
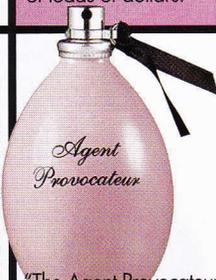
Mountain high: L’Occitane uses steam distillers to create its essential oils.



Jewel tones: A fragrant Provençal lavender field.

SHOP TALK

ELLE POLLED CHIC BOUTIQUES ACROSS THE COUNTRY FOR THE BEST PERFUMES TO GIVE AND TO RECEIVE. BY MEGAN DEEM

<p>BEST-SELLERS</p>	<p><i>Brownes & Co.</i> Miami</p>  <p>"Bond No. 9 Chinatown's peony-and-tuberose scent is such a stunner that people buy two," says Brownes proprietor Nikki Mallon.</p>	<p><i>Scent Bar</i> Los Angeles</p>  <p>Susanne Lang Vanilla Collection contains nine versions of the hugely popular sweet ingredient.</p>	<p><i>Zitomer</i> New York City</p>  <p>Eighty-five years old and still the world's No. 1 women's fragrance, Chanel No. 5 defines classic.</p>	<p><i>Cos Bar</i> Aspen</p>  <p>"Thierry Mugler Angel is an aphrodisiac," says Lily Garfield, owner of Cos Bar. "Men can't stop smelling it!"</p>	<p><i>Apothia</i> Los Angeles</p>  <p>After 25 years of peddling others' perfumes, Apothia launched its own: If, a white-flower-and-musk blend.</p>
<p>WHAT WOMEN BUY FOR MEN</p>	<p><i>Acqua di Parma</i> Colonia</p>  <p>"Acqua di Parma Colonia, a conservative rosemary-veliver combo, is quite affordable," Mallon says. "but reeks of loads of dollars."</p>	<p>"Women often prefer that men wear invigorating fragrances," says Franco Wright, cofounder of Scent Bar. "Fresh colognes such as Gendarme evoke an adventurous, dynamic lifestyle."</p> 	<p><i>Eau Sauvage</i> Dior</p>  <p>"Eau Sauvage by Dior is timeless—the perfect blend of crisp citrus," says Beth Friedman, the cosmetics buyer at Zitomer.</p>	<p><i>Allure Homme Sport</i></p>  <p>"The Atlas Mountain cedar and amber in Allure Homme Sport reflect what an outdoors man should smell like," Garfield says.</p>	<p><i>Daim Blond</i> Serge Lutens</p>  <p>"One sniff of Daim Blond by Serge Lutens and you immediately feel the softness of iris combined with spicy cardamom, wrapped in musk," says Apothia owner Ron Robinson.</p>
<p>WHAT MEN BUY FOR WOMEN</p>	<p><i>Agent Provocateur</i></p>  <p>"The Agent Provocateur brand evokes such sensuality that the perfume literally has men salivating," Mallon says. "I've seen it at the counter myself!"</p>	<p><i>Patchouli</i> Jalaine</p>  <p>Many consider Patchouli by Jalaine the ultimate version of that earthy scent.</p>	<p>Created in 1929, Jean Patou's rose-and-jasmine-heavy Joy remains a perennial male favorite.</p> 	<p><i>24 Faubourg</i> Hermès</p>  <p>According to Garfield, the orange-blossom top notes and vanilla base of Hermès 24, Faubourg drive guys crazy.</p>	<p><i>Papillons</i> L'Artisan Parfumeur</p>  <p>"Men are drawn to floral fragrances for women," Robinson says. "La Chasse aux Papillons by L'Artisan Parfumeur combines tuberose with orange blossom for just the right amount of zest."</p>
<p>PERFECT GIFT</p>	<p><i>Odeur 53</i> Comme des Garçons</p>  <p>"Comme des Garçons Odeur 53's sand-dunes-and-metal aroma is unique and unisex," Mallon says. "It never disappoints."</p>	<p><i>Miss Marisa</i></p>  <p>"Ebba Miss Marisa is a knockout," Wright says. "It contains an unusual ingredient, mint, that delights the senses and dances with the water-lily note to make this perfume irresistible."</p>	<p><i>Eau d'Hadrien</i> Annick Goutal</p>  <p>According to Friedman, the light, pure scent of Annick Goutal Eau d'Hadrien holds universal appeal.</p>	<p><i>Clive Christian X</i></p>  <p>From the company that created "the world's most expensive perfume," Clive Christian X suits the elite with its Egyptian jasmine essence.</p>	<p><i>NellyRodi Scent Factory</i></p>  <p>"NellyRodi Scent Factory is an inspired idea," Robinson says. "It takes a core fragrance genre—oriental, for example—and creates eight interpretations around it."</p>

ALL STILL LIVES: STEVEN KRAJISE