

# SCENTS AND SENSIBILITY

Rajiv Sethi, founder of All Good Scents, a contemporary Indian fragrance-based ecommerce platform, talks to **Faye Remedios** about his olfactory inspiration, becoming a 'nose', and secrets of the trade



Rajiv Sethi

## WHY IS THE PERFUME INDUSTRY DOMINATED BY FRANCE?

The perfume industry in India is dominated by *attars*, industrial fragrances, raw material producers and home fragrances. Fine perfumery is at a nascent stage here. The field is still dominated by France, which was the birthplace of modern perfumery. Associating perfumes with fashion brands was what gave the fragrances global dominance. The brand image, R&D and the money involved in creating and launching fragrances is huge, which is why it's restricted to international companies.

## WHERE DID YOU STUDY THE ART OF PERFUMERY?

French perfumery has always fascinated me. During my college days in Mumbai, I tried to find an institute where I could formally learn the art of perfumery. After two years of searching, I got to know about a school in France called ISIPCA. It is a very exclusive school, founded



Rajiv testing fragrances

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in 1970 by Jean Jacques Guerlain. They taught perfumery, cosmetics and food flavouring. However, the entire course was taught in French. I had to learn the language and give a phone interview before being accepted. I was the first Indian to attend their post-graduation course. I learned the very secretive prestige perfumery, recognised the world over, not only for its beautiful perfume bottles and fragrances, but also for the in-depth knowledge about its raw materials, extraction processes, manufacturing techniques, packaging designs and their savoir-faire. In 2000, I was awarded 2nd prize, the Young Perfumers Award, in Paris by the Société Française des Parfumeurs.

**WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO BECOME A PERFUMER?**

My grandfather's business involved exporting essential oils from India to Africa and Europe. In Africa, oils were specially blended for henna, sandalwood fragrances and for other local rituals. In Europe, it was mostly essential oils that were in demand. I often spent my holidays sniffing various raw materials along with my grandfather. My interest and inspiration grew from there. In my view, you require a lot of passion, patience and perseverance to learn the art of perfumery. Natural talent isn't necessary. You can be trained to master this olfactory profession.

**WHO ARE YOUR MENTORS?**

Maurice Maurin, the *parfumeur créateur* has been one of my mentors. He was the president of the 'Société Française des Parfumeurs' in Paris for four years, and has created many fragrances for international prestige brands and fashion houses. Edmond Roudnitska, a master perfumer, has been my source of inspiration.

**WHAT IS YOUR ADVICE TO PEOPLE WHO WANT TO BECOME THE NOSE OF A PERFUME HOUSE?**

My advice is to first learn as much as possible about what it takes to become a nose and the opportunities available.

Read up about a few well-known perfumers, try and connect with a few and seek some insights or guidance. Social media offers many ways to reach out to perfumers, and chances are they will be happy to talk.

**WHAT ARE THE DOS AND DON'TS?**

Becoming a perfumer is a lengthy process, so you have to be patient, persevere and not think about instant gratification. It takes several years of being in this field to receive gratification, if at all!

**WHAT IS IT THAT DISTINGUISHES A GOOD PERFUME FROM A BAD ONE?**

A good perfume should be wearable, with allergen-free, quality raw materials. Also, it should not stain clothes. The fragrance should be well-composed, harmonious and not disturb the senses.

**HOW DO YOU TAILOR A SCENT?**

First, a detailed brief is made, based on which the main accord or the olfactive story is developed. Next, key raw materials are selected from the perfumer's palette, and trials continue until the desired accord

is established. After final stages of adding other materials in sync with the brief and balancing the intensity and tenacity of the fragrance.

**DOES YOUR NOSE TIRE FROM TESTING SCENTS ALL DAY?**

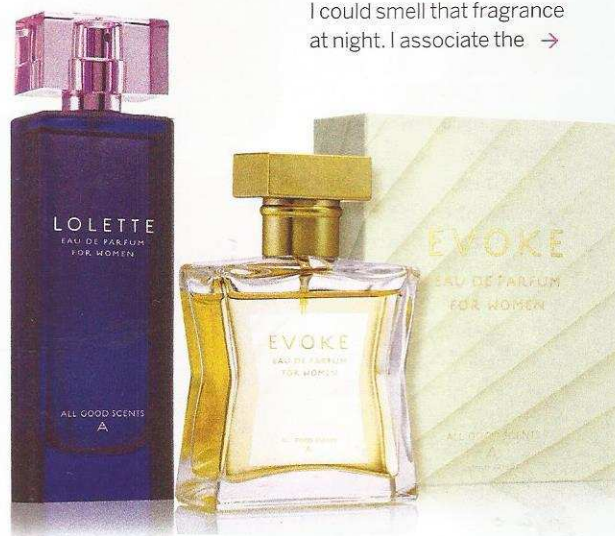
Yes, the nose does get fatigued. There are techniques to reduce this, which can be learned.

**A PERFUME ONLY WORKS IF A LARGE NUMBER OF PEOPLE LIKE IT. HOW DO YOU DETERMINE WHAT IS CURRENTLY IN DEMAND?**

It's a commercial success if large numbers of people like it. There are many niche brands which experiment with fragrances that are very good but not commercial successes, as the reach is low. There are trend indicators, which can help match demand.

**WHAT'S YOUR OLDEST OLFACTORY MEMORY?**

One of my oldest memories is of smelling the night blooming jasmine (*raat ki rani* or queen of the night) at my maternal grandparents' place. In fact, as a child I used to look forward to visiting them so I could smell that fragrance at night. I associate the →





## WHERE CAN ONE TRAIN TO BECOME A PERFUMER? WHAT ARE THE CAREER PROSPECTS?

Formal training is available in certain specialised schools or institutes like the ISIPCA or Cinquième Sens in France. You can also seek a job at a renowned fragrance house. Most of these have an internal training school, so one can train on the job. No specific qualification is required to become a perfumer, but having knowledge of chemistry helps. Career prospects are diverse within the domain. Other avenues within the perfume industry are:

Chemist at a raw material production company

Laboratory assistant and operator

Evaluator at a fragrance house

Research analyst

Sales representative at a perfume store or lifestyle store

Sales or marketing person at a fragrance distribution company

Product and graphic designer

smell of the jasmine flower with those childhood days.

### WHAT ARE YOUR FAVOURITE RAW MATERIALS?

My favourite raw material is patchouli oil, a bushy herb belonging to the mint family. It is distilled from dried leaves in Indonesia, China, India and a few other tropical regions in Asia. The oil has an amazingly warm, humid, earthy, woody smell with spicy and leathery undertones.

### WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES YOU'VE FACED IN YOUR CAREER?

Operationally, the biggest challenge was to find key partners to work with for sourcing and manufacturing. We had to work continuously with our partners to explain to them the quality of work required and help them improve their output. We were very clear about not compromising on our quality parameters,

and we lost a lot of time bringing these to an acceptable standard. Being a new brand that's distributed online, one of the major challenges was

### HOW DO YOU IMPROVE YOUR SENSE OF SMELL?

Try and associate a smell with an object, event or experience. Memory triggers are very strong—olfactory memories can be attached to an emotion.

Try and sniff new smells regularly to train your nose to remember them.

Be aware of your surroundings and keep your nose open to smells around you.

If you're smelling multiple odours at the same time, take brief sniffs and don't hold the fragrance long under your nose. Change odours in between so your nose does not get saturated. Take a few breaks if your nose feels tired.

for customers to smell our fragrances. This hurdle was overcome with our innovative concept of SCENTBOX, where customers can choose any three fragrances from our collection for ₹165 with free delivery. So they have enough time to try them out at their convenience and select one.

### TAKE US THROUGH THE PROCESS OF CREATING A FRAGRANCE.

Usually, the process starts with an idea by the perfumer or a brief from marketing. In both cases, an olfactive story is imagined and a profile of the user is created. The perfumer will think of this brief and identify a few key raw materials from his palette, which he can work around to create this new fragrance. Trials are carried out to form an accord, which will be the main theme of the fragrance. Trials are often evaluated and formulation

continues by adding selective raw materials around the accord. Often, the toughest part is finishing a fragrance. Generally, the process takes anywhere from six months to two years.

### WHAT ARE THE TRENDS IN FRAGRANCE NOTES THIS YEAR?

For women, we will find a lot of fruity notes, gourmand notes including praline and chocolate, and fresh floral notes like freesia. For men, we will see more mint notes dominating the aromatic composition and oud-based compositions.

### WHAT GROWTH DO YOU PROJECT FOR THE INDIAN PERFUME INDUSTRY?

Fragrances in India registered strong growth in 2014. The fragrance industry is estimated at ₹3,000 crores. This was driven by the increased use of fragrances by

both men and women. The usage of fragrances was previously limited to occasions. However, this changed over the review period, especially during 2014, as more consumers started to use fragrances on a regular basis. New brands were available at affordable prices, which made it easier for consumers to incorporate them into their daily grooming. According to the latest Euromonitor report of 2015, fragrances are expected to increase by a value CAGR of 12 per cent constant as per 2014 prices during the forecast period 2014-2019. Growth will be driven by the increased daily usage of fragrances by consumers. The use of fragrances is still limited primarily to affluent urban consumers. However, with expected increases in annual disposable incomes, the use of fragrances is expected to increase, thereby boosting the growth of fragrances in the forecast period. ■