



"For most people it's very difficult to precisely identify smells - not that their noses are deficient, it's just that they are not trained to do so. Other than well-trained experts, not many people are able to identify the aroma of lavender in a blind-smelling for instance."

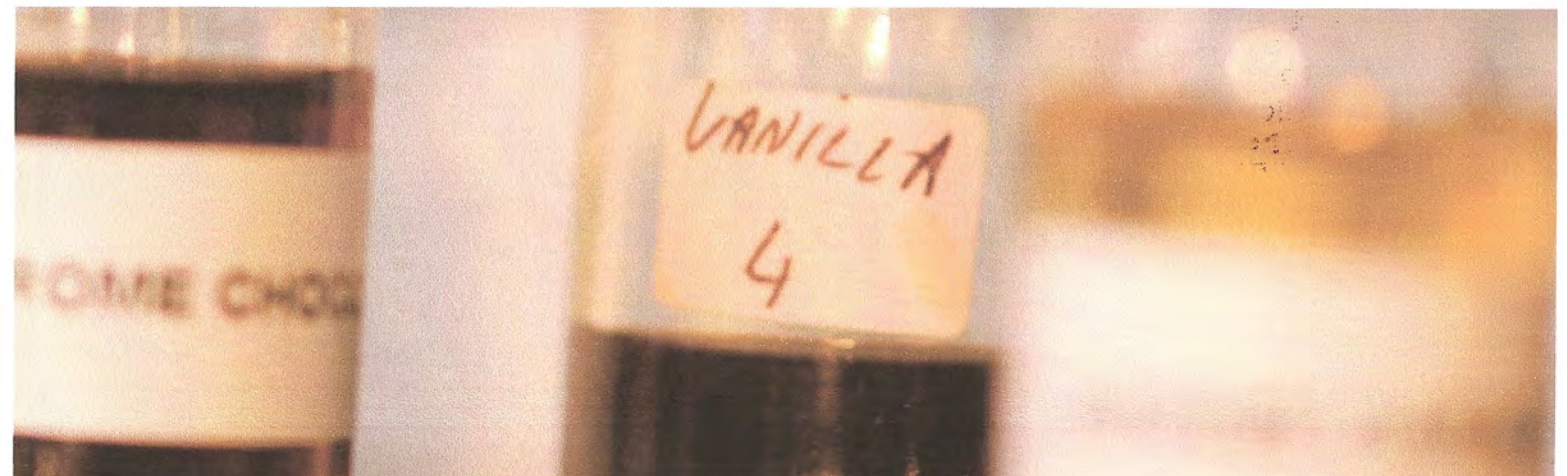
Alexandre Schmitt.

The **STRUCTURE** *Behind* The **BOUQUET**

Perfumes and Wines : 2 Worlds 1 Method to Explore Them

by Katharina Woitezyk

Alexandre Schmitt, 41 years old and native of Bordeaux, is one of these experts; and he is well-trained to do more than just identify aromas. The uniqueness of his job makes him one of the world's only "perfumers" who gives aroma classes to wine-makers and other wine professionals. Yet Mr. Schmitt's nose is not physically different from other people's noses. Nor does he have any particular smelling talent. So as you may already be thinking, he is not like the infamous anti-hero Jean Baptiste Grenouille in Patrick Süskind's novel "Das Parfum", villain antagonist of Tom Tykwer's 2006 feature film, "Perfume". Alexandre Schmitt has just been trained to precisely identify aromas and to remember them.



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— Alexandre Schmitt

"All individuals have more or less the same olfactive capacities," he explains, "yet a perfumer, ('nez' in French), is trained to memorize some 1500 different aromas. An oenologist on the other hand would differentiate only some 80 different aromas. An average person without any special training would recognize only some 20 aromas, in a "blind - smelling", whereas an experienced perfumer is able to recognize up to 4000 different aromas. It's all a question of training and memory. To become a perfumer, one needs to smell, about 800 different aromas each day."

A graduate of the famous ISIPCA (International Superior Institute of Perfumery, Cosmetics and Food Flavours in Versailles), Alexandre has worked for several years as a perfume creator in Paris and London. Later on he started to teach perfumery and aroma classes at the University of Bordeaux School of Pharmacy from where he quickly switched to teaching aroma classes in Bordeaux University's famous oenology department. He is recognized as an aroma specialist in the wine world and his classes are attended by some of the greatest oenologists and winemakers. Jean-Claude Berrouet, the winemaker of Bordeaux's world famous wine Pétus, Tim Mondavi of the Mondavi wine family in California, Michael Silacci the winemaker of Opus One, and Marimar Torres from the Spanish bodegas Torres are just some of his famous clients.

"Of course there is a special method to remember all these smells," admits Alexandre. "The key to aroma

recognition and memory is constant training and precision. To memorize different aromas you need to understand them and to classify them into different categories. Let's take this aroma here for example," he takes a small bottle with a brownish liquid, opens it, dives two paper perfume testers in it and hands one to me, one to the photographer. "What do you smell?" He asks. My first impression is a very familiar one "It's a very strong smell, something very tannic." I say. "To me it rather smells like some sort of pastry," says Rodolphe, the photographer. "Wait a second, now I also smell some coffee and some woody aromas," I add.

"The aroma I gave you to smell was the Madagascar vanilla, this is the finest, most expensive, and most complex vanilla aroma on the market. It is characteristically composed of some warm food-like aromas, some powdery perfumes; there are also some woody fragrances, some hints of dried flowers, notes of cacao and coffee. The Madagascar Vanilla aroma belongs to the woody family, more precisely the balsamic category. Other aromas of the same family would include the vanillin aroma (found in oak barrels), the benzoine absolute aroma, tolu balsam resonoide, myrrh oil, caramel flavour and Peru Balsam absolute. The reason why none of you were able to find the Madagascar Vanilla is because it is not one of your aromatic references."

He hands us another paper, with a transparent liquid. We smell and I say, "This one really reminds me

of vanilla, more precisely a mix of vanilla and sugar, very common in German bakery products, it smells like Vanille Zucker." "Right indeed," Alexander states. "This molecule is known as vanillin, it is from the same category and family as the Madagascar vanilla, yet most people recognize it easily, since they have a reference for it. Smell the other one again," he suggests. Surprisingly the Madagascar Vanilla now smells like vanilla pod.

"To recognize an aroma, you need to memorize and categorize it, once you are able to put an image on an aroma, you will be able to identify it accordingly. The vanillin is something you will be able to easily identify now, since its smell conjures up the image of 'German Vanille Zucker'." And so what about our first tricky aroma? "Now you will also be able to identify the Madagascar Vanilla, since you will assign the vanilla pod image. The basis of my job consists of giving people the methodology to structure their olfactive thinking in order to create solid smelling indicators that imprint a perfect mark of each aroma in their mind."

This seems evident. We recognize things we know through observing them. When we smell a glass of wine we may identify its aromas more effectively by assigning to each one a corresponding image.

What is the difference between the aromas contained in wine and the one's contained in perfume ?

"There are many differences. First of all the aromas in perfume are much stronger, and more exalted. This is because a perfume's alcohol content is higher. Plus perfumes are made to smell, whereas the aromatic concentration in a wine is much lighter. Yet because there are more aromas in a wine than in a perfume, wines are more complex. Perfumes are produced to make people smell good; whereas wines naturally develop aromas through fermentation and other enological processes. Aside from the pleasant aromas in wine, there are some that we would not like to be caught wearing. Typical wine defects, like the musty wet cardboard corked smell from the trichloranisole molecule, will never occur in a perfume."

I learned that another major difference between wines and perfumes has to do with the number aromatic molecules in both products : the concentration of molecules in wine is one million times inferior to that of a perfume. He told me that it is much easier to identify the aromas of a perfume than those in a wine. Then making reference to wine's complexity he quickly adds, *"On the other hand, one will find many more nuances in some of wine's fragrance groups, like those belonging to the floral aroma family."*

So is it more difficult to smell wines or perfumes ?

"Wines, for sure, the complexity is extreme, the aromas are very diluted

and sometimes you only have a slight hint of a certain aromatic note. It took me about ten years to adapt my 'perfume trained nose' to the world of wine and its molecules.

Another huge difference with the world of perfume is the fact we can use the retro-nasal way of smelling (by exhaling through the nose) as a way to further analyse wine. Tasting therefore becomes an another way to smell.

There are only 4 different tastes : sweet, bitter, salty and sour. All the rest are aromas perceived through retro-nasal smelling. If we just had our taste, a fruit flavour like strawberry and cherry would taste the same, they would just be sweet and sour. But thanks to the aromas perceived via the retro-nasal passage we are able to differentiate their individual 'tastes'".

What's the difference between the approach of a sommelier or an oenologist and yourself regarding the aromatic analysis of a wine ?

"Sommeliers memorize styles of wines and grape varieties. A sommelier would memorize the aromatic characteristics of a Riesling from limestone soil, a Riesling from granite soil, a Riesling from flint... and so on. I would analyze the exact aromas contained in the glass without necessarily asking myself of which grape variety the wine was made. Yet it is very helpful for sommeliers and oenologists alike to have the necessary aromatic expertise and aromatic memory to recognize the exact aromatic components found in a Riesling from a certain type of soil. The richer your

aromatic vocabulary the better you will be able to identify a wine and to analyze it in a tasting."

How did you come from perfume to wine ?

"I always had a passion for wine, and finally I found wine richer, more challenging than perfume, from an aromatic point of view."

Do you have a favourite wine ?

"One of my absolute favourites is the Chevalier Montrachet from Anne Claude Leflaive, for me this is a Chardonnay in all it's splendour, it is well-balanced, floral, and fruity, with a beautiful minerality. Minerality is very important in great Chardonnay and in great Burgundies in general. This wine is absolutely elegant and refined."

Another thing I like are wine and food pairings, these open yet another universe to wine. There is the gastronomic approach of pairing a wine to a dish and the oenological approach of pairing a food to a wine. Personally I like menus in which different wines and different dishes with completely different aromatic styles follow each other thus creating a culinary work of art. A favourite pairing would be vintage port with cheese, a real delight."

Then jokingly taking a glass of wine and frantically smelling I ask if one can become obsessed with smells. *"Not really,"* he smiles. *"Yet curiosity is very important since it helps you to continue learning more about aromas every day."* ■

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To contact Alexandre Schmitt and to learn more on his olfaction seminars visit www.wine-olfaction.com