

Below: to change career from perfume to wine, Alexandre Schmitt spent 12 years training with the winemaker at Château Pétrus

The nose of Bordeaux

Jane Anson meets Alexandre Schmitt, who left a career in perfume to consult for some of wine's biggest names

LIKE COACHES PUTTING athletes through their paces, an array of consultants work with the best wine estates today. One might come along with a potential purchaser to check if the terroir is any good, and another carry out a geological survey to be sure the right grapes are planted in the right soils. Another might help in the vineyards for specific regimes (perhaps one consultant for biodynamic vines, another for 'normal' ones), and pretty much everyone will have a consultant helping with the winemaking itself. But when all that is in hand, how do you ensure your wine nudges ahead of the competition?

Step forward Alexandre Schmitt, ex-perfumer, who in his former life would spend his days selecting, for example, the perfect nuance of rose by choosing between dried roses, freshly cut roses, rose oil, rose tea, rose-hips, rose-petal jam...

'Every fragrance we encounter has dozens of associated scents, and different aspects give complexity and nuance,' Schmitt says. 'A smell such as cinnamon has woody, spicy, leathery, sweet and hot aspects. Thinking about this makes you more receptive to what you're smelling.'

'Being a perfumer is a highly technical job, and much of your time is spent in a laboratory. The world of perfume is only 5% high-end brands, the rest is scents for toiletries and shampoo. Eventually I wanted something more, and coming from Bordeaux I have always had a passion for wine.'

Training with the best

So, in his mid-thirties, Schmitt decided to change careers. He is neither, he points out, a winemaker nor an oenologist, but he learned about wine from one of the best in the business – Jean-Claude Berrouet, the legendary winemaker at Château Pétrus. For 12 years they met twice a week, exchanging ideas about wine and fragrance. Schmitt wasn't paid, but he was given bottles to take away to learn more about their nuances and flavours.

Sensation and perception

We live in a largely visual world. About 60% of our stimulus comes from sight, with 20% from hearing, 10% touch, 9% smell and just 1% from taste.

That doesn't mean that we don't come into contact with hundreds if not thousands of smells every day, but there is a profound difference between what we receive as a sensation – the act of a molecule hitting our nasal passage causing a physiological reaction – and actually perceiving, processing and comprehending it.

Schmitt suggests that most of us can identify about 20 different smells.

A trained wine taster could take that number up to 80 or 100. Schmitt is capable of identifying up to 1,500 aromas. He believes that 4,000 is probably the upper limit that a human would be capable of identifying, and is convinced that all of us are capable of smelling as much, if we have the exposure and we practice. 'When perfumers are in training they will smell 800 different molecules per day,' Schmitt says. 'You have to put the time in, but once you have the tools, you become not only more precise, but the wine itself tastes better.'

Schmitt at a glance

Born Bordeaux

Education Studied perfumery at the Institute International du Parfum in Versailles; worked for 15 years in the world of perfume

Clients Some as sole consultant, others as part of the blending team: Spottswoode, Opus One and Robert Mondavi in California; Pétrus, Margaux, Cheval Blanc and Yquem in Bordeaux (with olfaction training for the team at Lafite Rothschild); Bodegas Torres and Bodega Ysios in Spain

Clearly the training worked. Today, aged in his late 40s, Schmitt carries out aroma consultancy for wineries in California, France, Spain and elsewhere. His role begins once the wine is made, helping to finesse the blend, thinking about the texture and the aromas in different lots of wine, and blending them as he would a perfume. 'It's tougher to isolate aromas in wine than it is in perfume, mainly because there are many other components in a wine.'

Schmitt says that even expert tasters can benefit from his approach. 'I don't take any new clients in blending without their undertaking some olfactory education first. It's important because, even if we know that perception is personal, there are certain things that are right, that relate to actual molecules in the glass. There is a rational, objective way to look at wine, and I ensure we use this vocabulary.'

'I would typically see a client three or four times over the course of blending. I help them better understand the aromatic signature of their wine, perhaps find more red fruit texture, or ensure the blend works well between the first and second wine. And I do a lot of work with barrels, ensuring they are using the right toast. It's not about transformation but finesse. I may try to correct a few things, but most of the time blending to correct mistakes is not a great idea – you just bring down the overall quality.'

Freshness and ageing

'Understanding the implications of specific aromas is key. Take Left and Right Bank Bordeaux. Raspberry and blackcurrant are two key aromas of Bordeaux because you find them in Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon – these are the two that give the most fruit, flesh, freshness and ageing potential.'

'When you want a wine that can age, you need to respect the freshness of the fruit, so I stay focused on the acidity of the samples. If one smells jammy, I know the grapes were harvested too late. Of course some consumers like it, but you risk having problems of acetic acid. Often critics don't note it – I have seen wines that have been given 100 points that risk acetic-acid spoilage.'

Away from work, he says one of his favourite grapes is Pinot Noir: 'It has less texture than Cabernet Sauvignon, but has a wonderful nuanced aroma.' He also loves Rioja ('you often blend a Rioja after two or three years of barrel ageing, so there are some great aromas to play with'), and although most of his clients keep his involvement confidential, he does have his name on one bottle. If you want to see what a professional perfumer can make of a wine, try to track down Bodegas Ysios' Essence of Ysios Alexandre Schmitt 2007, a 100% Tempranillo wine from Rioja. You won't be surprised to learn that its key characteristic is an 'aromatic intensity'. ■

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