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Monsieur Jean-Pierre LELEUX, Président de l'Association
Patrimoine Vivant du Pays de Grasse et Nadia BEDAR,
responsable de la Mission Patrimoine culturel immatériel
Maison des Associations
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Dear Miss Bedar and Mr. Leleux,

For a young man from California with little knowledge about the perfume industry, the international sentiment that “perfumery belongs to the French” (even as far as to say: to the Grassois) could have been the end to his burgeoning interest in fragrance. Ten years ago, I was that young man. Now I am a young perfumer in Paris for a multinational perfumery company, and my journey began in Grasse. I have the great honor of being part of the Patrimoine Vivant du Pays de Grasse, and I hope to see Grasse perfumery awarded the status of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

My teenage hobby of collecting fragrances developed into a curiosity about the people and the history behind the art of perfume. But, I did not know where to begin my foray into this world. Perfume was and still is a mystery in the United States. After all, one only sees the glossy magazine ads with the celebrities and models that represent the “brand.” Few high school career counselors in the United States would be able to guide a student towards a profession in the perfume industry. There are limited avenues to learn about or experience the natural, creative, technical, and human aspects of perfume.

The Journey Begins in Grasse

To fully understand and appreciate an art you have to look at its history – anonymous.

A serendipitous encounter with a retired fragrance scientist when I decided to pursue perfumery in college opened my eyes to the birthplace of modern perfumery: Grasse. The fragrance scientist exalted the Grassois’ expertise in cultivating olfactive plants, their ability in transforming these plants into perfume ingredients, and the perfumers’ gift in harnessing these ingredients to create perfume masterpieces. He told me I had to live, breathe, use, and master natural ingredients – a dying art – in order to be a perfumer, as these elements are fundamental and irreplaceable in perfume creation. To fully understand my art, I must comprehend the life of an olfactive ingredient, from plant to perfume bottle.

Heeding his advice, I pointed my compass towards Grasse and moved to France. I found my way to the Grasse Institute of Perfumery and continued my apprenticeship in several Grasse fragrance houses before attending another perfumery school in Versailles, the Institut supérieur international du parfum, de la cosmétique et de l’aromatique alimentaire. My current employer enrolled me in its internal perfumery school and sent me to its headquarters in Grasse and their creative center in New York for training.

I quickly understood why Grasse is a Mecca for all perfumers: it is a reminder of the history of perfumery and a place of education for young perfumers. Grasse produces the gold standard of high quality natural raw ingredients from plants through its expertise in ingredient transformation. The majority of the natural palette of every fragrance house depends on the ingredients produced in Grasse. Naturals add richness, depth, and quality to a fragrance—an unique element of “naturalness.” The history of perfumery began with fragrances built around exquisite natural ingredients fabricated in Grasse.

A Sensory Tour

In Grasse, I learned that perfumery engages the senses, mind, and spirit. A perfumery student in Grasse can smell, touch, and see the dried plants before they are transformed into perfumery raw materials. He can study every technical parameter in the scientific process of extraction, be it extraction by hydrodistillation, solvent extraction, infusion, supercritical carbon dioxide extraction, etc. to ensure the best product. Most importantly, the student can experience firsthand the cultivation and culmination of generations of hard-working Grassois.

I visited the fields of the rose centifolia, the Grasse rose. I watched the workers pick each petal at the break of dawn, and then watched the petals transform into the exquisite and mythical rose centifolia absolute, which is used in the perfumes of Chanel and Dior. After seeing this labor of love, how could a perfumer not want to add this product into his next formula?

A Change in Course

Unfortunately, sentimentality is not enough to keep demand high for rose centifolia or the other essences from Grasse's flora. The perfume industry has changed and continues to change, affecting Grasse. For example, industrial and residential sites replaced once-abundant fields and orchards of rose, jasmine, and bitter orange (orange blossom). Perfumers look to cheaper alternatives when faced with financial constraints and choose absolutes from the cheaper Turkish or Bulgarian rose. Increasing competition from other countries reduced the demand for local jasmine and bitter orange. The remaining fields and flowers, and the stories of the families who have painstakingly tended them, are being edged out when they should be honored and preserved.

Globalization has led most of the creative activity away from Grasse, first to Paris and New York and then, strategically, to cities with growing markets. While the few remaining Grasse fragrance houses continue training young students today onsite, much of the perfume education has followed the perfume activity, far away from Grasse. Many companies still acknowledge the importance of Grasse and send the perfumery students to Grasse to take in perfume's rich history and culture. However, few students have the privilege to spend an extended amount of time in Grasse to fully capture the traditional know-how.

Additionally, the use of natural ingredients in the fragrance industry as a whole is decreasing as the use of synthetic molecules is increasing. These synthetic chemicals were once used to nuance natural fragrances, but now naturals are more often used to add an element of quality to a synthetic-rich perfume. It is not surprising to hear senior perfumers lament the new generation of perfumers' lack of experience using naturals.

The Human Connection

As I explored the fields and fragrance laboratories of Grasse, I discovered the most important and often-overlooked component in perfumery: humanity, in the form of the people I met along the way. It is difficult to find the humanity in our art when the only human we see is the mysterious model in the perfume ad. But, perfumery is a beautiful collaboration of passion and hard work of many unseen individuals, each playing a pivotal role in the process:

- plant cultivators and extractors
- perfumers and assistant perfumers
- evaluators
- marketers and sellers
- legislators
- application technicians
- research scientists
- and many others

The Grasse perfume education and experience provide individuals a deep understanding of the communal and historical aspects of the art.

The Next Destination

Grasse has guarded its perfume industry from the beginning, adding to the perception of mystery and secrecy. As a young perfumer, I am blessed to have started my journey in Grasse because it gave me the holistic view of perfume creation – the end-to-end process from the growth of living ingredients, the transformation of these plants into perfumery raw materials, to the combination of these materials to create a fragrance.

I believe the status of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity is critical to the future of Grasse perfumery by: preserving the traditions of care and quality; showcasing the specialized skills and contributions of these artisans; and opening the door for others like me to take their first step into the world of perfume.

Cordially,
Alex Lee

