

## a smell of any other rose

If you feed mouldy compost to chickens the eggs taste bad. But if they eat clover and live insects they give fragrant eggs with fresh yellow yolks. And if grapes grow on well-kept soil the wine shows it. It makes a difference which well-kept soil; a wine from the slopes beside the Rhone does not taste like a wine from the irrigated mountains of the Napa valley. That's what they call terroir. It's a kind of karma: what goes in comes out. The same is true of flowers, though it is not so widely known. I am going to tell you how I learned this, and how it changed my life.

I was coming out my front door when I saw my neighbour's labradoodle pissing on the trunk of my cherry tree. I threw my cane at him and shouted at her to get the hell away from my yard and my plants. Then when he had dragged her away, I walked over and looked at the base of the tree. A whole circle of poops, of varying degrees of decomposition. Obviously she had been using my yard as a toilet for a while. Perhaps he had too. While I was out there I checked on the cherry buds developing on the branches of the tree. I normally cut a twig or two during the few days that the blossoms are really fresh and keep them in water in my sitting room. They smell fine, a pink delicate smell that surrounds your nose and gently touches your nostrils when you absorb it. The blossoms would be at their best in the following week, so I cut off a few and brought them in. But instead of the soft pink tickling sensation what I got when I inhaled was a rancid yellow prickling, just awful. I took the twigs and threw them over the hedge into my neighbour's yard, hoping the dog would choke on them.

There is a flower shop on the corner of my street and 112 Avenue, so I walked down there and bought some roses to replace the cherry blossoms. I unwrapped them and put them in a vase. Then I sniffed the blossoms, and had an awful revelation. Cow poop, unmistakable once I identified it. Another bad experience. But it was satisfying to throw them over the hedge, so the thorns might bring some

real damage to the dog. I did some research then, and what I learned on the internet was that nearly all commercially produced roses are fertilized with agricultural effluent, and not just any effluent, such as farmers have been using for thousands of years, but the excrement of animals that have been filled with hormones and fed mass produced chemical foods and even ground up residues of others of their kind. No wonder the roses smell bad.

A specific technique works here. When you smell a flower you can let a large number of comparisons go through your mind, as you do when you taste a wine. And just as an experienced wine taster does not think only of berries and chocolate but also of tar and rubber and smoke, so it is with flowers. If you want to focus precisely on the smell of the particular flower at nose, you have to think of as wide a range of comparisons as you can in the short moment the smell is vivid. That vivid period begins when the flower begins to smell like a flower, and ends when it has saturated your nose and you are really not smelling but remembering. There is a kind of suggestion that you have to resist here. You may know that the flower is, say, a crocus and so you may think of spring in the woods and make yourself smell fresh spring woodsy things. But that is just coming from your mind; you have to range all over the smell universe and when something seems to fit you home in on it. When you do, with the flowers you buy, the results are horrifying. Gasoline, acrid smoke, sewage, month old eggs, skunk, athletes' sweatshirts. You name it, if it resembles something that might have been given to the plant, then there it will be in the flower. We just think these commercial flowers smell lovely because they have nice shapes and attractive colours, and we let these steer us to nice-smelling comparisons. But if you do it objectively, and smell what is really there, you get something very different.

You can do this for yourself. It isn't just me. I decided to go public, and I made a video explaining the kinds of things that go into the flowers you buy - with pictures - and the ways you can detect them. I posted the video on YouTube and waited. Thousands of people saw it. Many comments on people's blogs. It was a revelation

to everyone; suddenly no one with any imagination could smell roses as heady or fresasias as delicate. For they are not, at any rate not if you buy them in stores and then smell them my way. And once you know my way there is no going back; you cannot unlearn it.

There was a CLOSING SALE sign on the flower shop. I had an idea. I went in and offered to buy it. There wasn't much to buy really, just the remainder of the lease and a little equipment. Easily afforded with the damages from my suit with my other neighbour. New name "Bouquet" on a prominent sign, and "NO DOGS except guides for the olfactorily handicapped" on a slightly more discrete one. And fresh flowers, of course. At first I had my new staff go out to find unpolluted places where they could pick them. As business grew I persuaded organic farmers to become my suppliers, and I insisted that they specialize, in ways that fit the idea.

Now each flower, whether cut or in a pot, comes with a label. The label gives associations gathered by a panel of expert smellers. Not smell associations, of course. Roses smell like roses, though some roses smell like shit. Instead, general images and ideas that the flowers produce through a really sensitive nose. For example we have two vintages of lavender, and the label of one says "jumping up and down on a silken trampoline" while the other says "approaching the fire just before the smoke gets in your eyes". Our three lilies are "washing the dishes while watching the television", "tennis, travelling first class, and just a hint of adultery", and simply "lots of fresh underwear". These are accurate labels: customers are guided by them. Often they come back later and say "I want the underwear lily again" or "do you have a rose with a little more race track in it?"

That sounds like the end of the story. Success. But life is never so simple. You'll remember I had a NO DOGS sign, with an exception for dogs helping people who can't smell. That was meant to be a joke, the exception bit. So I was not really prepared when I was reminded of it by an old lady who had brought her dog into the shop. An equally ancient limping bloodhound, with its jowls almost touching the

floor. Her jowls, actually, the dog. She, the lady, told me that she could no longer smell but her husband had become obsessed with a crocus in a pot, taking it from room to room with him. When he could smell it he could speak, for the first time in years. The crocus had died from over-watering so she had ordered another from us, but it did not work. So here she was with her bloodhound. She held the remnants of the crocus before the old dog to remind her what to smell for, and undid the leash. The dog went straight to the crocuses, on a low stand near the back door, and rummaged around, pushing some aside and knocking some right off the stand, until she rested her nose against one particular pot, sighing deeply and wagging her tail. That was what she was meant to do. But then she left the crocus table and wandered sort of randomly but with a determined look among her wrinkles. She stopped in front of a stand of fresasias. We took one and handed it to her but she ignored it and continued to sigh and wag at the stand. After four attempts we found the one she wanted, and then she went on to the Irises and the Chrysanthemums. We found the ones she wanted out of all of these. All totally different; there was nothing similar in the labels at all. But the old lady insisted on taking them all home, so I took her money and watched the two of them limp out of the shop.

The flowers worked; the old guy could talk. She told her friends; they came looking. They would buy flowers almost at random - good for business - and take them home to deal with sleeplessness, depression, migraine, hot flashes, what have you. When a flower worked, they would come back for others that had the same effect. But we could not tell which ones would work, not by smelling, not us humans. So I got a pair of wrinkled smelly old smellers, from a bloodhound rescue place. They learned pretty quickly what was wanted. So when someone comes back with a violet that is good for migraine the dogs root around in the shop till they come up with particular roses, daffodils, or dahlias, grown on particular soil and fed in particular ways, that have the same effect. These nearly always work. It seems I'm in a different business now.

The bloodhounds are old and stubborn. Their bladders are unreliable. But they can

remember as well as smell. Sometimes they stop in the middle of searching the store and dash outside to point at a dandelion or a nettle that fits the bill. So now I take them for walks, and they suggest what I should bring back. There is a terrible discovery here, that the dogs have forced me to accept. Often what works best smells like dung, garbage, or vomit.

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