When babies smell like household cleansers

Other countries, other customs – and other olfactory preferences

Babies smell like honey and milk, like vanilla and sweet almonds. Like something soft, warm and powdery. They smell the way angora wool feels.

Yet babies smell like something else too – only a few days after birth. They smell like the country where they were born. Sometimes, they smell so unmistakably that you could point at them and say with certainty: You're English or Italian. Or French. Or Spanish.

English and Italian parents swaddle their babies in fragrant clouds of "Johnson's" brand baby powder: Floral, sweet, faintly reminiscent of Chanel No. 5.

Spanish and French babies, on the other hand, smell like eau de cologne and orange blossom, both of which typify the "Mustella" and "Nenuco" brands.

Olfactory differences that don't happen by chance. Perfumers know: Nations have more than just their own languages, mentalities, customs and ways of life. They also have their own olfactory preferences – and aversions.

How does cleanliness smell?

This is a question to which every country has a different answer. In Norway, household cleansers smell like pine, in Central Europe like lemon. And in the south, freshness is predominantly associated with a third scent: Lavender. The most extreme example: In several African countries, soaps that contain cresol are popular – that's a phenol with an antimicrobial effect that has an intensively chemical and leathery smell. At least to Europeans. To African noses, on the other hand, cresol smells like deep-down cleanliness.

There's lots of opportunity for confusion: To the English and Germans, Spanish and French babies smell like household cleansers. While many U.S. cleansers remind them of perfume: Because Americans associate freshness first and foremost with sweet, vanilla-like scents like that of "Ombre Rose" by Brosseau.

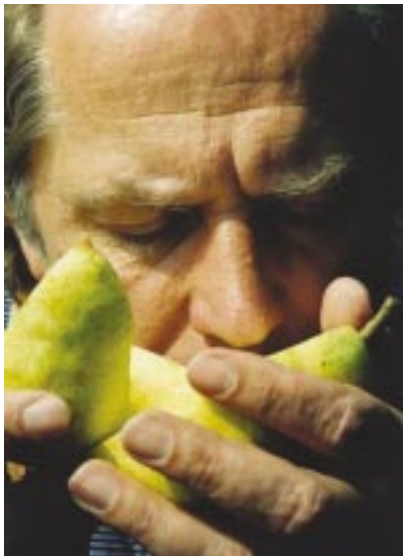
The reason for all this olfactory confusion: Odors and fragrances are messages for which there are many translations. Each of us interprets them a little differently – depending upon the cultural and social environment in which we live.

What gives rise to these national olfactory preferences? First of all, what we're accustomed to: We like what's familiar to us. At least when it involves pleasant memories.The smells from the nature that surrounds us also make a big impression on us. And, along with them, the smell of our regional cuisine. The success enjoyed by Drakkar Noir (Guy Laroche) and Paco Rabanne pour Homme, for example, is closely linked with the scents of lavender, thyme, basil and rosemary that are so popular in the Romance countries.

A further important factor: Climate. A fragrance will be perceived differently in different regions of the earth – depending upon the humidity and temperature that prevail there – and will trigger different preferences and aversions in each region.

Love affairs with flavors

Many nations have full-blown love affairs with a certain flavor: Americans not only eat more vanilla than any other nation on earth (three-quarters



of the world's production). The consolatory flavor of the Aztecs is also a nose ahead in the New World from an olfactory standpoint – sometimes with almost bizarre consequences: The composition of Old Spice by Shulton, the best-selling after-shave in the United States, is very similar to that of Coca-Cola. Both are based upon lemon, orange, cinnamon, ginger – and vanilla.

Favorite smells are a vast field: The men of the Kwoma, a Papua tribe in New Guinea, are in love with the smell of the mijica tree, which they use to build houses: It's a major social event in which only men participate. Kwoma women, on the other hand, love the smell of the bark fibers they use to weave nets – usually as a communal female effort.

Travelers to India, on the other hand, can't avoid the impression that some parts of the country are smothered in an intoxicating cloud of jasmin. Not just because huge quantities of this intensively fragrant blossom are cultivated there. As a temple plant, it's a firm element of their daily religious life – and it's also contained in virtually all toiletries. The situation is entirely different in Japan. Strong body odors aren't approved of there. Personal fragrances have to be extremely unobtrusive in order to be accepted.

We smell like herbs

Nutrition – a further aspect: We not only love the fragrance and taste of the herbs that surround us – we sometimes also smell like them. Our skin betrays what we eat. Nations with different eating habits have different body odors and different olfactory preferences.

The typical reaction to strange (foreign) body odors is often aversion. A bit of biology is responsible for this too. We use odors as a classification pattern for assessing that which is strange. Those who don't fit into our familiar olfactory grid aren't considered trustworthy. In the Animal Kingdom, too, rejection of strange odors serves to protect and preserve the species.

It's comforting to know that there are also smells that are similarly assessed by totally different nations. The scent of violet is perceived as being old-fashioned in both the Old and New Worlds. And if Lyall Watson is to be believed, religious incense, in particular, is a textbook example of smells that have an equally (narcotic) effect on all people, which is probably why they can trigger such an ecstatic sense of community.

So smells can also prove that we are all similar to one another, in spite of all our differences. If perfumers can be believed, this similarity could even increase, because even greater international similarity in fragrances can be expected in the near future. So will all nations one day smell more or less the same? If it leads to better understanding between them – why not?