

The Perfect Perfume

Making Sense of Fragrances

BY Cheryl Fenton ■ OPENING PHOTOGRAPH Jonathan Hale

A scent can lead straight to a memory: A quiet afternoon in the park surrounded by freshly cut grass might uncover a childhood memory of the first day of school.

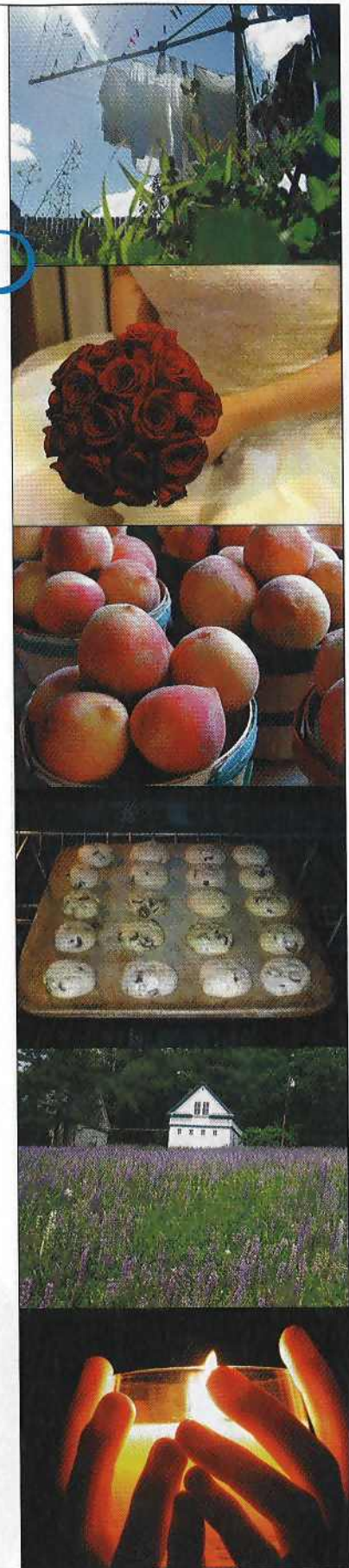
Or it can conjure up an emotion: The warmth of a vanilla candle taking you back to a kitchen full of desserts and family at holiday time.

Or a feeling: A certain musky air might draw your attention to a handsome man standing next to you.

What is it about certain smells that bring us to the edge of so many emotions? We asked Dr. Alan R. Hirsch, neurologist, psychiatrist and the neurological director of the Smell & Taste Treatment and Research Foundation in Chicago, and the author of more than 100 articles on the psychological power of scent.

"Smells have an impact on moods and behavior because they affect the olfactory lobe, which is part of the limbic system or the emotional brain," he says. "Scent has both psychological and physiological effects. The quickest way to change a mood is to smell a smell."

According to Dr. Hirsch, the sense of smell is unique to other senses. How you perceive a scent and whether you like it occurs in opposite order than other senses.





When it comes to taste, sight and touch, you identify what you're tasting, seeing and touching first, then you form an opinion. With smell (as well as sound), the scent is linked so closely to our brain that you first have an emotional response (whether you like the smell), then you identify it (that's a rose or a cookie, for example).

What scents you use can even affect what others think of you. For instance, studies suggest that wearing a floral and spice fragrance might make you appear slimmer. Researchers at Hirsch's foundation had thousands of men inhale scents and then guess how much the women who wore them weighed. Women who wore spicy-floral blends scored lower numbers, perceived to weigh an average 12 pounds less than their actual weight!

Choosing the Right Scent

There are six main categories of perfume: floral (light and feminine), fruity (fresh), oceanic (sea), greens (outdoorsy), Orientals (exotic and intense) and woody (earthy). Experts aren't sure why these certain smells have certain effects. But there are a few hypotheses. One is that smells elic-

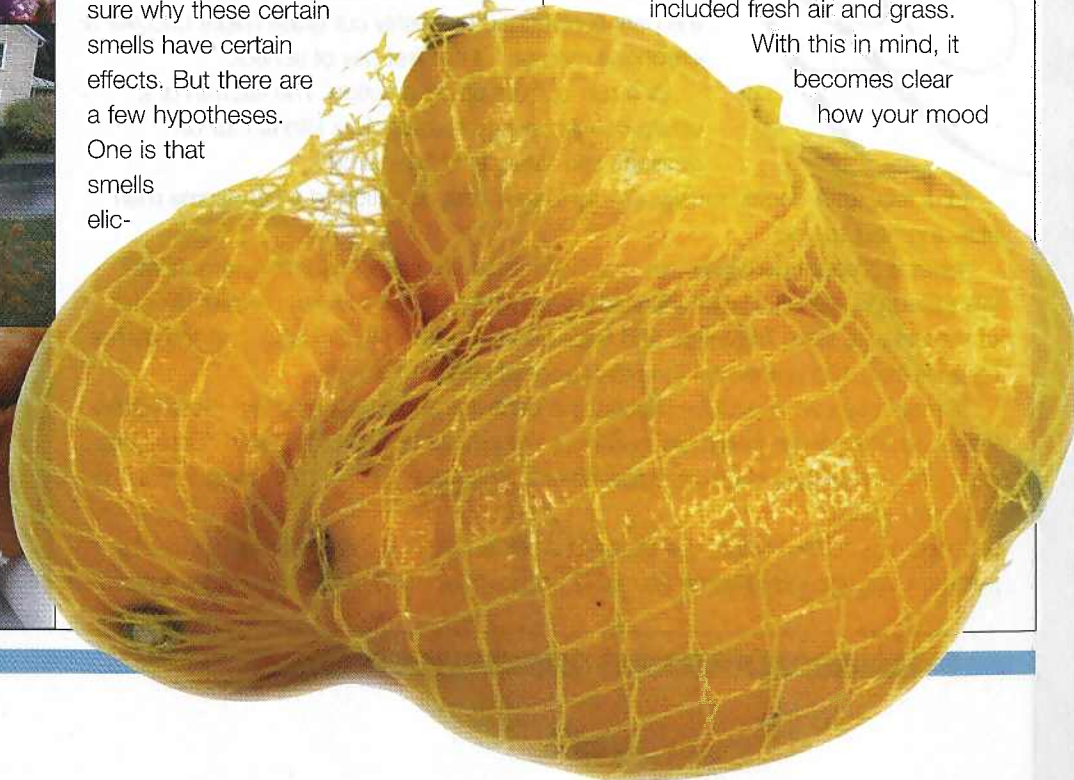
Fragrance Facts

- Perfume comes from the Latin *per fumum*, which means "through smoke."
- Eau de means "water of" in French.
- Men's eau de cologne contains about 3% to 5% perfume oil; while splash colognes contain .5% to 2% oil.
- Eau de parfum for women contains 15% to 18% perfume oil; while eau de toilette has 4% to 8%.
- Parfum offers the strongest concentration of fragrance and should be used sparingly.

it a type of Pavlovian response, in which you expect something good or bad to follow a certain smell (a cupcake after the smell of baking goodies or memories of a fire you witnessed when you smell smoke). Another possibility is something that Dr. Hirsch calls "olfactory-evoked nostalgia," which is when a smell you experience brings a vivid memory.

Do you look back fondly on your childhood days and birthday cakes or homemade cookies? Many do. "[The Foundation] did a study on 989 people, and the No. 1 smell that evoked childhood memories in the United States was baked goods," he says. Following baked goods, the rest of the list depended on when the subjects were born and where they grew up. These included fresh air and grass.

With this in mind, it becomes clear how your mood



will dictate to some degree the scent you choose to spray, as different scents affect different parts of the brain and evoke different emotions. Follow these guidelines to enhance your frame of mind—or the frame of mind you'd like to be in!—from playful to passionate and everything in between.

■ **Romantic:** Sweet-smelling flowers, including rose, freesia and lilac

■ **Exotic:** Light notes with spicy oriental essences like lotus flowers

■ **Flirty:** Citrus scents, green smells like freshly cut stems, crisp florals (mandarin flower, hyacinth) with musk, spice or sandalwood

■ **Sexy:** Spicy flowers (ylang ylang, jasmine or narcissus) or lush fruits (plums or black currants) with something warm or musky (spice, amber or patchouli)

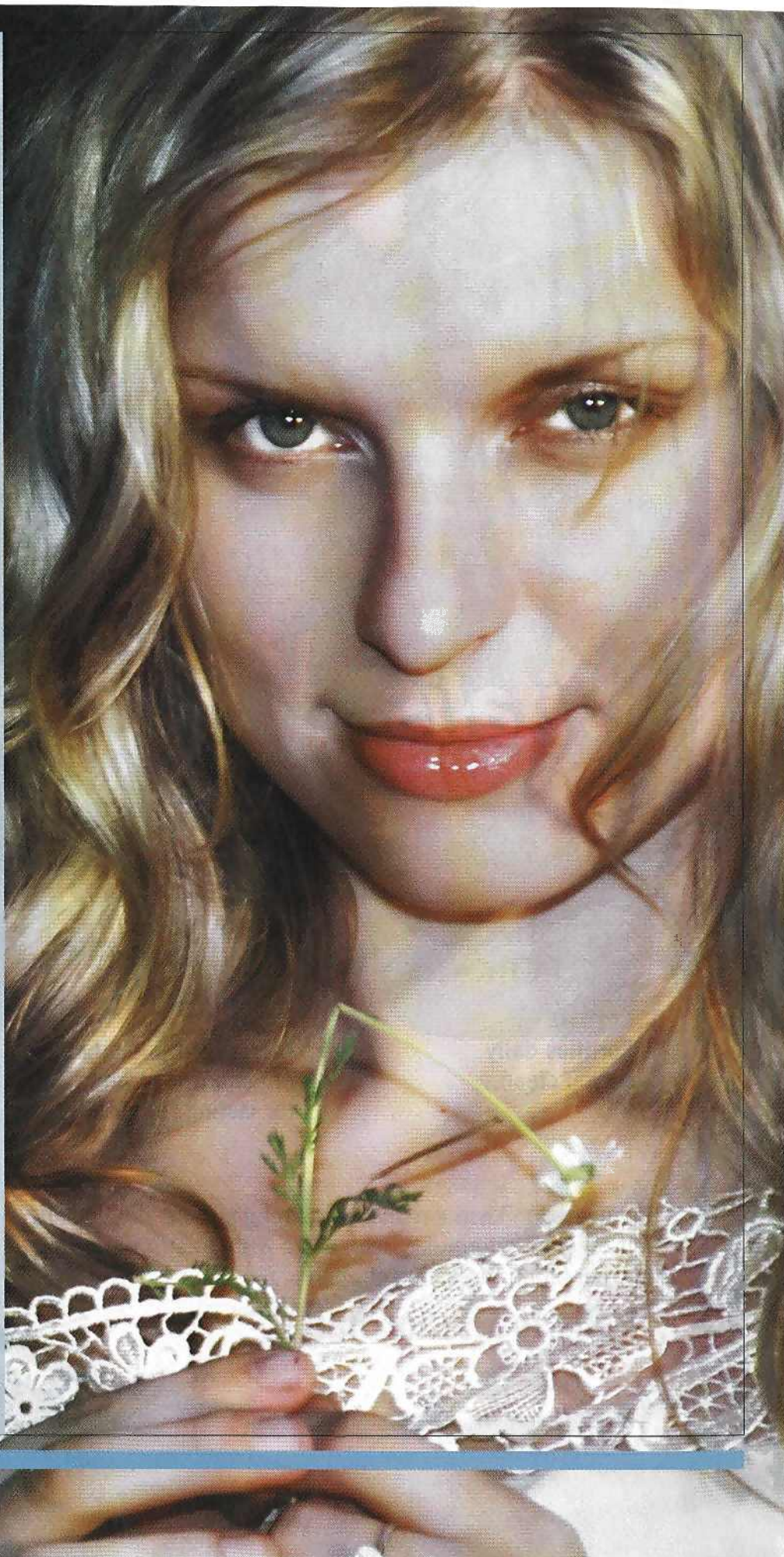
■ **Cozy:** Comforting scents like vanilla, ginger or almond

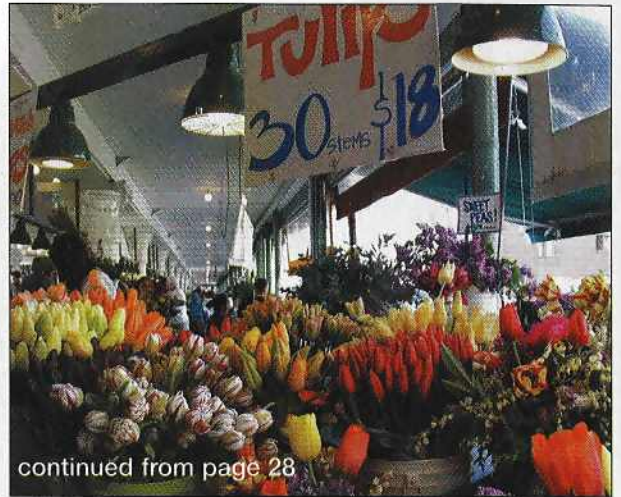
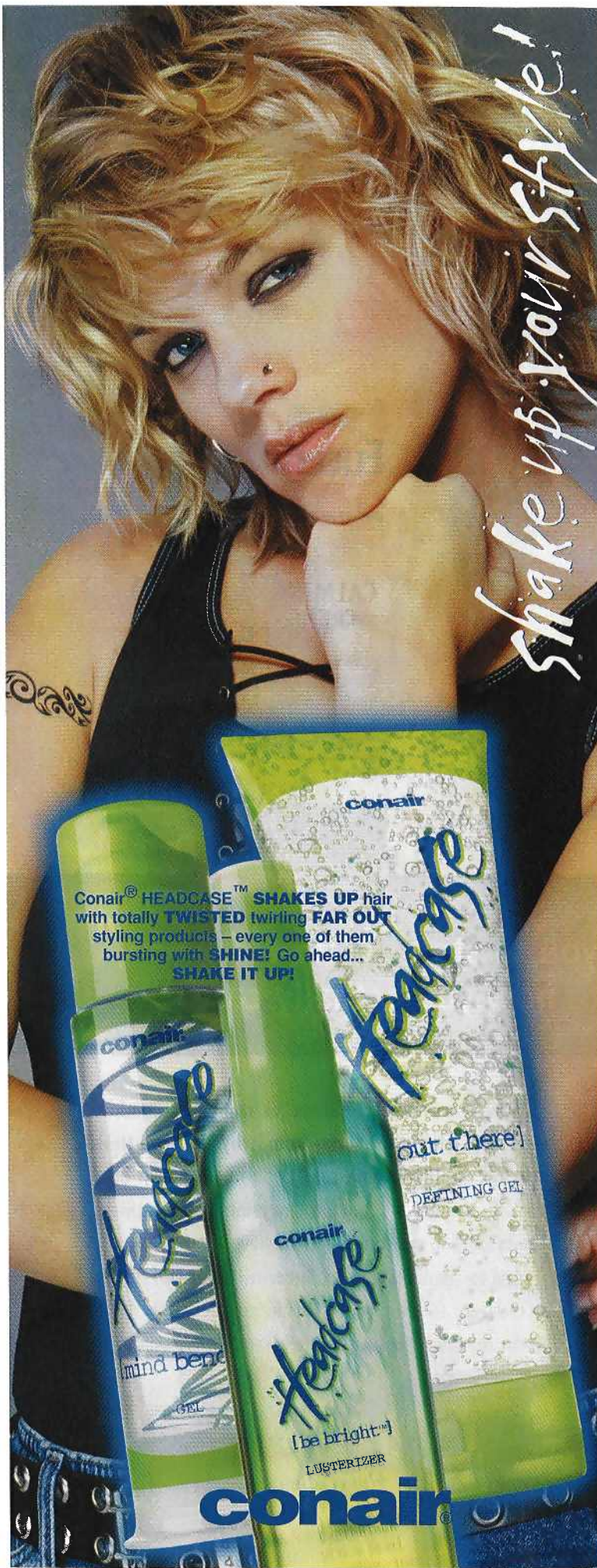
When to Wear What

You wouldn't wear a low-cut sexy dress to the office (or at least we hope) or a heavy sweater on a warm summer day. Consider your fragrance something you wear based on occasion and season, just like your favorite pair of jeans or a sexy satin top. Oriental scents are intense and tend to be more suited to eveningwear and special occasions, while greens are more appropriate for casual wear. Lighter perfumes are refreshing during hot weather, while more intense perfumes are comforting in the cooler months.

Tips on Testing

When choosing a perfume, don't be a spraying maniac. Never smell more than four at a sitting. Between each dab or spritz, take a whiff of. / continued on page 30





a cup of coffee. It'll clear your sense of smell—consider it the sorbet of fragrance-finding!

Always try a perfume out on your skin, not those little cardboard tabs. Thanks to diet, skin type and perspiration, a perfume can smell differently depending on where—or who—it's on. Also don't smell a fragrance immediately after you spray it; give the alcohol a chance to evaporate a bit, so that it doesn't assault your nose. The perfume will go through three stages—the top, middle and base notes. Don't judge a perfume on its top notes, even though this is the first thing you will smell. Wait 10 minutes before deciding whether it's the one for you.

Applying Your Choice

Since perfume scent retains longer on oily skin, apply a layer of oil-based unscented lotion on your skin before putting on your fragrance.

To avoid spraying too much, spray into the air and then walk through the mist. If you are using a dab method, put the fragrance just on the pulse points of your body. The body heat that is generated in those areas will cause the fragrance to "come to life." Try your inner elbows, wrists, nape of neck, cleavage, ankles and behind your ears.

To cover more skin area without being overbearing, dust on the powder version of a perfume. Keep it all in moderation. People should be able to subtly smell you, not know you're about to enter a room by your scent preceding you.

A little heavy-handed? Not to worry, this is a fixable faux pas. Blot the offending spot with a cotton ball dampened with rubbing alcohol, a trick used by perfumers to lighten fragrances during production. ■