

TO meet

On standard tests of **smelling ability** women consistently score higher than men

Q&A Mohammad Semhani

MASTER OF SCENTS

DO COUNTRIES HAVE SMELLS? AND CAN ONE LEARN HOW TO DISTINGUISH A PERFUME'S INGREDIENTS? SYRIAN-BORN MOHAMMAD SEMHANI OF DUTCH PERFUME EXPLAINS.

How did you become a perfumer?

I grew up in the harbour city of Latakia in Syria. When I was a young boy, my grandfather imported essential oils and he would let me smell them. It turned out that I had a talent for smelling and distinguishing scents. But he taught me a lot of skills too, such as knowing which combinations do and don't work. Coffee aroma, for example, does not go with woody ones, but it's excellent with something sweet, grapefruit or orange. In 2008, I decided to open my own perfume shop in Latakia and quickly became known as 'The Nose of Latakia' because I was making customised perfumes for people on the spot. Unfortunately, when the war broke out, I decided to flee the country with my family and had to leave my shop.

Now you run a shop called Dutch Perfume in The Hague. How did that come about?

I always knew that I wanted to come to the Netherlands and continue my business here because a lot of ingredients for perfume, such as flower extracts and alcohol, are produced here. Partly thanks to Stichting De Stadscoalitie of The Hague, a foundation that helps refugees put their expertise back into practice, I was able to start Dutch Perfume and open a shop in the city centre. I don't sell perfumes by any big brands; I make original perfumes for customers on the spot instead, and I use the wide array of pure ingredients I have here. First, people can tell me about one or two of their favourite perfumes, and then I put together a scent and let them smell it. Or I make something from scratch for them, which is actually even more fun and challenging.

Do countries have different smells?

Definitely. Two scents that always take me back to Syria, and that I miss, are those of jasmine and freesia. You can find them at any market there. I'm planning to make a series of perfumes for all the provinces of the Netherlands, but I have to explore them all first.

Lastly, do you have a favourite smell

and, if so, what is it? I don't have a favourite smell, but I love the smell of history; old scents that have been around since the beginning of time, such as geranium, with its lemony aroma and potent warm green scent.

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