

With the Porsche 911 SC Targa on the Garden Route

19/10/2016 A fragrant carpet of flowers, trees, moss, and the sea: the luxuriant Garden of Eden along South Africa's Garden Route. Paris perfumer Alexandra Carlin is immersing herself in the inspiring aromas of South Africa.

One final glance at the water, one last barefoot stroll along the boardwalk. The journey is drawing to a close. In a moment—a moment that she thought would never come—Alexandra Carlin will be moved to tears. She has just finished packing her suitcase, filled with clothing from France and impressions of South Africa. She's all set to fly back to her hometown of Paris. But then—Carlin can scarcely believe her nose—there's a sticky-sweet scent in the air, at once soft and exhilarating. She inches her way through the wild shrubs standing between the wall of the building and the garden fence, holding her gentle hands protectively in front of her face. Wild bees found it first: the honeybush, which grows only in South Africa and whose yellow blossoms are used in preparing tea. Alexandra Carlin is at a loss for words. She has spent day after day on the Garden Route in fruitless pursuit of this rare plant. And here it was all along—in the garden of the vacation home where she's been staying.

Being a perfumer: You're telling a story—without a single word

For the past nine years, Alexandra Carlin (36) has worked for Symrise, one of the world's major producers of flavors and fragrances. Since receiving her perfumery certificate in 2011, she has created a host of new fragrances, many of them for the global market. Some are developed on client request, others on her own initiative; either way, Carlin dives into each project with equal delight. "Some clients want too many scents in their perfume, which makes the composition restless. Then I have to determine which scent I can subtract," says the perfumer, who works with up to two hundred scents at any given time. Carlin learned her craft first in Versailles, France, at the school for fragrance Institut supérieur international du parfum de la cosmétique et de l'aromatique alimentaire (ISIPCA), and later at Symrise's school at their German headquarters in Holzminden. She later consolidated her knowledge under the guidance of a perfumer in the southern French town of Grasse, the perfume capital of the world. It is here the protagonist of Patrick Süskind's novel Perfume refined his olfactory skills. Carlin's original career goal was to become a writer and to move people through language. "But at the age of eighteen," she says, "I was listening to the radio and heard perfumers talking about their work. I knew right away that it was the profession for me."

And what do you learn at a perfume university? The art of smelling fragrances? "Yes, and you keep persevering until you're able to break down scents into their constituent parts and to determine the proportions of the contents." This calls for a very special talent, one that must be continuously honed, each and every day. Carlin is firmly convinced that anyone can memorize the raw materials that make up a perfume—all you need is time. "But composing a perfume is a completely different challenge. To do that, you have to be able to strike a chord with people and find the fragrance that will win their hearts. You're telling a story—without a single word."

Carlin is wearing a white T-shirt and form-fitting black jeans that hint at her athletic training—a clue to past successes in the triple jump and 100-meter dash. A colorful silk scarf streams out behind her in the breeze, as does her light brown hair. Her face is delicate and bright, with a faint dusting of freckles on her nose. Her brown eyes sparkle. Holding a dark green leaf between her thumb and index finger, she rubs her fingertips together, absorbing the plant's structure with her hands. Closing her eyes, she says, "Now it's time to break the rules again, ignore the usual thought patterns, and keep an open mind. Because now I can think about anything under the sun—except plants, of course, because I need the right images in my mind." A few minutes later, she is certain that the leaf smells like mutton cooking on a charcoal grill that's just a tad too smoky, in the loving embrace of peppercorns. This is a woman who needs only a clear head to translate scents into words. "I draw my inspiration from travel and exposure to new cultures, as well as from novels, exhibitions, and music. All of these enhance my sensitivity. And my stories are born of this emotion." Emotion in a vial.

It's love at first scent when she meets the Porsche 911 SC

South Africa was missing from Alexandra Carlin's universe of fragrances. This country is a perfumer's

paradise, with nature to breathe in, tree bark to examine, grasses to caress, blossoms to sniff. Carlin doesn't ignore the tuft of wolf hair, either, left behind on a chain-link fence. She takes in the smell of the railing on Tsitsikamma Bridge, of the sand on Wilderness Beach, of steel cables, of car seats. She can name the perfume worn by the waitress walking by. The photographer's shampoo is no secret, either. And it's love at first scent when she meets the 1978 Porsche 911 SC. Because it smells so wonderfully horsey. "It reminds me of a vacation in Mongolia. Mongolian horses smell quite different from their cousins in France," she comments. Once again, she presses her nose to the Targa's leather seating: "Powerful and wild, the scent of adventure."

Carlin hums as she heads down the mountains of Franschhoek Pass. A small food stand breaks up the mountain panorama, looking forlorn along the side of the road. There's toast to be had, and Carlin laughs, telling us, "When I was a kid, I would often visit my grandma after school. The sweet, slightly roasted aroma of freshly toasted brioche always accompanied me for the last hundred meters. That's how I knew Grandma had just done some baking—and was reassured that she still lived." For Carlin, that is the fragrance that has defined her life.

With the Targa's top down, the Garden Route rolls by

Her current favorite is vetiver, a tropical sweetgrass native to Asia. "Vetiver taps into so many images in the mind's eye. It simultaneously smells smoky and woody, and is reminiscent of peanuts and grapefruit." But there are also odors that chase Carlin into her worst dreams, much as she'd like to forget them. The smell of seedy subway stations is one such nightmare: a mix of trash, spilled beer, and hurried, perspiring commuters.

With the Targa's top down, the Garden Route rolls by. Carlin heads toward Gordon's Bay, then on to Knysna to the west. She has now left the fertile region and rolling vineyards surrounding Cape Town far behind. She tilts her chin upward. There's a charred smell in the air; a fire is burning nearby. Time for a detour. A perfumer knows that true adventures beckon off the beaten path, so she parks the Porsche and explores nature with notebook and pen in hand, all of her senses sharpened. "Every day," she explains, "I have to re-educate my nose." This became particularly evident after the birth of her son Sasha. In the months following, she at times didn't wear perfume. "That's because if you use perfume, your baby will smell just like you." This was a stark departure for Carlin, who says that she feels naked without perfume.

Head note, heart note and base note

She explains that every composition can be viewed as a pyramid. The top or head note is the scent that is perceived first, but it is also the first to evaporate. The middle or heart note—the most significant component of a perfume—lasts a long while and has the strongest interaction with the skin. The base note is the one that reacts individually to the wearer's skin, which is why wearing perfume is a different experience for each person.

Carlin enjoys a chai latte while she jots down her impressions in her little notebook. To better remember them, she closes her eyes and tries to recall the aromas, to express them in words, and then to memorize them again. Carlin also takes an occasional sip from her water bottle. Water is always on hand during inspiration tours. She keeps the bottle in her handbag, next to a T-shirt belonging to her boyfriend. Its scent reminds her of Thomas. She closes her eyes, just as she did when they first met some years ago. One day, she'd love to return here with Thomas. Without a doubt, she has fallen under South Africa's spell. Is it the way she imagined? “There were a lot of images and scents floating through my mind. My word association: oldest continent, beginning of the world, fruits, red sand, large animals, big bang. The fragrances of honey, freedom, expanse, rooibos, and smoke.” Her imagination had painted everything red. “But in reality, it's green.” The landscape is ever-changing. How could one not fall in love with it? Craggy cliff coasts and lonely beaches segue into carpets of fragrant protea blossoms. Then, suddenly, you find yourself driving through a dark forest with tremendous yellowwood trees, whose supple branches riffle into the open Targa.

Carlin closes her notebook and mentions that there are also other ways to record scents: for example, by using headspace technology. “That's a device I can use to capture the smell of a living plant. The device breaks down fragrances into their smallest building blocks. The result is in effect a blueprint of the individual scents, which can then be replicated in the lab.” Carlin has relied only on her senses and put the scents into words. Her final note is on the honeybush: “It's the fragrance of freedom in your heart.”

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