

SWEET SMELL OF SUCCESS

With a long-held passion for perfumery, Nicholas Jennings has set up his own perfume brand in Languedoc-Roussillon. And it seems, life really is a bed of roses, says Jeremy Josephs

It's not every day that you set out to meet a 'nose', so it's an interview I have been rather looking forward to. But the magnificently moustachioed Nicholas Jennings soon puts me right – that I shall not be meeting a 'nose' at all.

"The trouble is that if you introduce yourself as a 'nose', it's a touch confusing, even for the French," explains the softly spoken 42-year-old. "Because if you say '*je suis nez*' – I am a nose – they tend to confuse it with '*je suis né*' and think that you are announcing to them, rather bizarrely, the rather obvious fact that you were born. So for the sake of simplicity I prefer to say that I am a perfumer."

The thought occurs to me that my own nose has been slightly put out of joint, so I decide to pursue another line of questioning. How on earth did an Englishman from Royal Leamington Spa, who was once employed as a marketing and communications expert by the British Sports Council Federation, come to be working as a perfumer in Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert, a picture-postcard medieval village located in

Nicholas reveals that he has always had – how should one put it – something of a sensitive schnoz

the department of Hérault on the Chemin de Saint-Jacques pilgrim route to Santiago de Compostella? A place that is one of the much-cherished Plus Beaux Villages de France, not least because of its church which, by any standards, is a jewel in the crown of Romanesque art in the Languedoc-Roussillon region.

"Aha," he replies, with but the mildest hint of a Warwickshire accent, "*bonne question*". Whereupon Nicholas reveals that he has always had – how should one put it – something of a sensitive schnoz. And that even as a young boy, he had been fascinated by essential oils and perfumes.

"I was lucky enough to grow up in a nice environment, where there were lovely flower gardens. Then, a little later, when I was wanting to

attract girls, I found that synthetic perfumes didn't work for me in that I had very bad reactions to teenage eczema. So I started creating my own fun perfumes using essential oils... fun in the sense that I was offering them to girlfriends on birthdays and they tended to go down rather well."

The truth is, though, that the world of perfumery would probably have remained a hobby and interest, rather than what it has metamorphosed into today – an engaging blend of passion and professionalism – had he been wholly satisfied in his work as a marketer. But he was not. So, aged 27, he handed in his notice and hit the road – a road which led him to Asia and Africa, and finally to France.

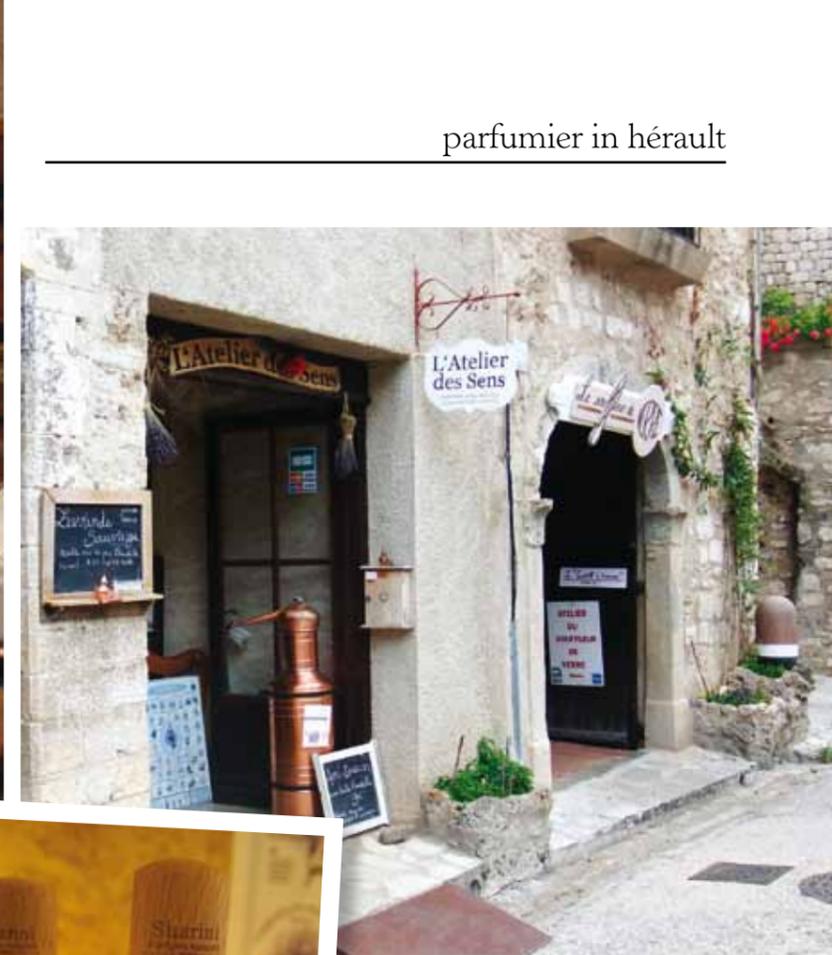
Nicholas first found himself on the banks of the River Ganges in the Indian city of Kannauj, the perfume capital of India. "I was very lucky to spend some time there and see people distilling. It was quite an eye-opener and really set me thinking... because their approach really chimed with what I was already thinking, a rejection of the artificial and synthetic.

"Then, I headed off to west Africa, which was where my French-speaking life began. I did the same thing there – learning how different herbs and plants are used.

"It was a tremendous experience in self-development and I was also lucky enough to meet some interesting French people there. I was invited to a biodynamic French farm in Provence, where I stayed and harvested wild lavender."

And that was that. Nicholas was hooked. Marketing out, perfumery in. Delete communications, insert essential oils. But easier said than done, as he soon came to realise.

"I realised after I finished these fascinating travels that I had to study modern techniques of perfumery too, so I set about doing precisely that. I studied in the UK, then moved to France with a view to getting as much hands-on experience as I possibly could. I got the various diplomas I needed, but the key thing for me was this biodynamic farm, because it reconnected me with what I wanted to do with perfumery – going back to the old techniques, rejecting the modern approach of the multi-billion dollar aroma chemical



industry – and generally embracing an organic and natural approach to the concept of developing scents. I became – and remain today – totally hooked and absorbed in this quest."

"I was invited to a biodynamic farm in Provence, where I stayed and harvested wild lavender"

Nicholas might well be organic, natural and alternative – and about as far removed as it's possible to be from the lucrative three billion euros per annum aroma chemical industry – but you'll have your work cut out if you want to get him to take a

Opening page and this page: Nicholas Jennings produces organic and natural scents

cheap shot at the likes of Dior and Chanel.

"It's not my thing," he explains, "to criticise products that are mass-produced like the mainstream perfumes. We can't all wear natural flower ingredients – there are simply not enough flowers in the world. But I do think we have gone a bit too far with aroma chemicals. There is a permanent search for aroma chemicals, which smell great but cost much less. It seems to me as if we have got away from our intrinsic and natural way of smelling. In days gone by, our sense of smell was a lot more evolved. Nowadays, it's almost become an accessory sense."

"That said, I use consumer

This page from top right: Nicholas's perfume shop, L'Atelier des Sens; heavenly scents; organic flowers; Nicholas enjoys getting close to nature

products too... what I would say is that we have a duty to consider where our products are from, to ask if they are made ethically and, above all, to know what's in them. The modern perfumery industry is now showing great reluctance to say what's actually in their perfumes, whereas on my boxes, I go out of my way to list every single thing that goes in. I want to go back to the origin of perfumery."

But where in France do you go to discover the basics of perfumery? Most people would put their money on Grasse in the French Riviera. But they would be wrong. For it was, in fact, the handsome city of Montpellier that established itself as the birthplace of modern perfumery. Back in the 18th century, guests of the then sleepy southern city were honoured with scented water and other 'gifts of fragrance', and the city's perfumes were described as being "à la mode de Montpellier" due to the extra ingredients that enhanced their fragrances.

So before you could say the French equivalent of Jack Robinson, Nicholas headed down to the administrative capital of the Languedoc-Roussillon region, determined to become well-versed in modern techniques, yes, but equally



adamant that he would embrace older extraction methods, such as *enfleurage* too.

“I also wanted to be in the countryside, living in the middle of the *garrigue*, the Hérault department’s wild landscape of thyme, oak trees and lavender, and in a self-sufficient home to boot, a kind of ‘Good Life’ à la française, if you will. Now, Montpellier might well offer many things – but in the countryside it certainly isn’t!”

And that was how Nicholas came to discover, and fall in love with, Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert where, tucked away in its immaculately restored winding alleyways, his small business Sharini Parfums Naturels and perfume shop L’Atelier des Sens are now based. But something else had also captured Nicholas’s heart – or someone else, to be more precise.

“I met Christelle through friends in the countryside. She is a basket weaver from Martinique and a year ago we were blessed with a beautiful daughter, Opaline. I guess meeting and falling in love with a French girl ultimately made settling down here much easier.”

If Nicholas is indeed living the Good Life à la française – growing

his own organic veg and cycling to his natural perfume business every day from a remote property in the *garrigue* – he is nevertheless anxious to provide a word of warning for those who might be tempted to emulate him.

“If you want to set up a business here,” he points out, “well, it’s not easy. There are many hurdles to overcome – not least bureaucratic.

“I also wanted to be in the middle of the countryside... living a kind of Good Life à la française”

There’s no doubt that the Anglo system is far easier. I have to allocate at least two hours a day to paperwork although that does include, admittedly, running my website.

“Nor am I ever going to become rich doing what I do, so if you are thinking of setting up shop here – don’t do it for the money. It’s got to be your passion. Get used to living on little, that’s what I say. I actually spent five years living on less than the SMIC – the French national minimum wage. As for the France’s famed 35-hour week, forget it... I

Top: vaulted arches and copper cauldrons inside L’Atelier des Sens
Inset: producing perfume

work pretty much seven days a week – in fact, I think I do 35 hours in two or three days. What I am saying, I guess, is that if you haven’t got the passion you are simply not going to stay the course.”

“The thought occurs to me,” I venture to suggest, rather unhelpfully, “that if you had stayed at the Sports Council, you might well have been in senior management by now.”

“Yes”, he concurs, “I have often thought that myself.”

“So what do you say?”

“That career pathway was not for me. I am far happier pursuing my passion for perfumes here in France. I get up at six in the morning, do fresh harvesting and distill my own products. It’s local. It’s organic. It’s fun. What a great way for the soul to wake to in the morning.” LF
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