



# Flavor Bites: Perfumers and Flavorists

Although there are distinct differences in the responsibilities and duties of perfumers and flavorists, these two occupations share many similarities and can learn much from each other

John Wright; johnwrightflavorist@gmail.com

The relationship between perfumers and flavorists has always been interesting, and sometimes it has also been uneasy. For sports fans, it is similar to the relationship between two teams residing in the same city—think Manchester United and Manchester City or the Yankees and the Mets. They have many aspects in common, but, often illogically, the differences tend to dominate the relationship.

Successful perfumers and flavorists share many of the same basic personality traits, and both must possess the same unusual ability to imagine complex odor mixtures. Both disciplines also demand a high level of self-confidence and offer the reward of seeing the result of their creative efforts on store shelves.

The problems start with the way most flavor and fragrance companies are organized. In most companies, flavors and fragrances are in separate profit accountable divisions, and the natural bias is to compete rather than cooperate. This is especially true in larger companies, where politics frequently assume a disproportionately important role and cooperation with “the other side” can easily be equated with disloyalty.

Envy is also unfortunately sometimes part of the problem. Perfumers are often significantly better rewarded and accorded higher status by companies. This can make any corporate programs to encourage cooperation appear to be one-sided and principally for the benefit of fragrance divisions. And this can discourage the

very flavorists who should be driving their side of the program.

The disparity in pay and status can be explained by the higher margin from some individual fragrance wins, especially in fine fragrances. But that is only a partial explanation. Flavorists need to recognize that a more important reason for the differential has been the superior ability of perfumers to market their abilities.

Central functions can do much to encourage cooperation, but in the end it will only work if both sides see tangible rewards. From my experience, the rewards are actually considerable, and, once in the hands of creative staff, the process is both enjoyable and very enlightening. Many of the comments that follow are a little more relevant for fine fragrance perfumers than for functional fragrance perfumers. Nevertheless, in most companies the key relationship is between flavorists and fine fragrance perfumers because many original ideas tend to trickle down from fine to functional fragrances.

## What Perfumers Can Learn from Flavorists

**Use of trace sulfur and nitrogen compounds.** Most perfumers treat powerful sulfur and nitrogen chemicals with extreme suspicion. This is not entirely illogical, as these compounds often are very difficult to use and sometimes give rise to stability concerns. Flavorists have learned to overcome these problems because these classes of ingredients

are important in nearly every sphere of nature. It is virtually impossible to create any modern, competitive flavor without some sulfur or nitrogen compounds. Translating flavor experience to fragrances is not so very difficult. The two divisions do involve quite different end products, but the same stability factors are typically involved in creation.

**Natural profiles.** Perfumers and flavorists both use nature as a reference, but the natural yardstick is an especially demanding taskmaster for flavorists. Even if a finished flavor is obviously a caricature of nature, it still demands a thorough understanding of nature to be successful. Perfumers can often learn from the structure of flavors how to better master the peculiar intricacies of nature. This is not to suggest that flavors can be imported wholesale into fragrances—they cannot. Nevertheless, many flavor notes can be quickly modified for fragrance use.

**Fruit flavor profiles.** In recent years, fragrance profiles have become lighter, and there has been much more interest in fruit profiles. Flavorists can assist perfumers by passing on the tricks they have learned to add authentic natural characters to their fruit flavors.

**Sharing.** Every flavor or fragrance is, at the end of the day, an individual and highly personal creation. Advice is highly beneficial, but it is impossible to act on the advice directly; it has to be filtered through the creative faculties of the person making the flavor or fragrance. For historical reasons,

flavorists tend to solicit advice from their colleagues more readily than from perfumers. Team endeavors between a group of flavorists and perfumers should also work to encourage sharing between perfumers.

**Use science when it produces results.** Flavors are aimed at much less abstract targets than fragrances, so the potential contribution of science, especially analytical science, is much more obvious. The downside of this situation is that flavorists have probably felt a little more threatened by science than perfumers, but most flavorists have learned that science can be a very helpful tool. In this context, flavorists can help perfumers make better use of their research facilities.

**Optimum complexity.** Flavors must taste appealing in finished foods, and this necessity makes it difficult to paint over errors. Overly complex flavors also can become very drab-tasting, and all flavorists quickly learn the optimum complexity for each flavor type. Perfumers can correct errors by subsequent additions, and consequently fragrances can end up unnecessarily complex. Simplification of a fragrance formulation by a team of perfumers and flavorists may be a step too far in many companies. It would certainly require a high level of trust and cooperation, but the result would be to add noticeably to the impact of the creation.

## What Flavorists Can Learn from Perfumers

**Ingredients never likely to be found in nature.** Flavorists have become so wedded to the use of ever more sophisticated analytical research during the past few decades that they can often miss effective raw materials that have no function in nature. Perfumers suffer from no such inhibitions and can always suggest unexpected, but highly useful, ingredients to flavorists.

**Bloom and substantivity.** These two properties of fragrance ingredients are commonly discussed in fragrance creation but are rarely mentioned by flavorists. At first glance, the differences in end-products might seem to explain this discrepancy. Clearly flavorists find more effective uses for very volatile chemicals than perfumers, and there are many real differences in the palette of raw materials used. Despite this, however, the similarities far outweigh the differences. Flavorists can learn from the superior ingredient understanding of perfumers and create more effective flavors for many finished food categories.

**Ignore science when it is not relevant and rely on creativity.** Flavorists and perfumers succeed best when they are directly involved with their customers' technical staff. There is no question that the technical staff in most food and beverage

companies usually has a solid technical background, and flavorists learn to communicate with them in a straightforward technical way. This is also somewhat true for customers in the functional fragrance area, but it is much less true of fine fragrance customers. Flavorists can become so involved in the process of communicating with their customers that they can convince themselves their work should be purely scientific. Perfumers seldom find their thinking following this purely scientific path.

**Emotion.** Brands, and the emotions associated with those brands, are far more central to any project on the fragrance side. This is historical rather than a reflection of reality, because emotions are an equally important factor for brands incorporating flavors. The understanding of the links between ingredients and emotions in flavors is in its infancy, and perfumers should be able to give invaluable advice here.

**How to market themselves.** Somewhere there is a happy compromise—while some perfumers can seem too obviously “on stage,” far too many flavorists make little effort to market their unique creative abilities. Flavorists can learn from leading perfumers on how to promote themselves and have the best of both worlds—creation and success.

---

To purchase a copy of this article or others, visit [www.PerfumerFlavorist.com/magazine](http://www.PerfumerFlavorist.com/magazine). 