



A Golden Age of Flavor?

The opportunities for flavorists today are vastly greater than ever before.

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If we look back on our childhoods, we rarely highlight the rainy days. Instead, we prefer to remember the sunny warm days in an idyllic setting of lakes, mountains, forests and streams (at least I do). As a society, we also often hark back to a Golden Age that is set firmly in a past that probably existed rather more in imagination than in reality. Given this retrospectively optimistic aspect of human nature, it is tempting to dismiss the Golden Age reminiscences of some of the more mature flavorists among us as just more of the same.

One question that has often been addressed to me in this context is the wisdom, or otherwise, of advising new graduates to train as flavorists. Responses from established flavorists to this question normally fall into one of two very distinct camps. One camp views the second half of the 20th century as a sparkling Golden Age for the flavor industry, sees every current trend heading in a negative direction and would advise against joining a profession in which the best days seem to lie decisively in the past. The other camp stresses the eternal nature of creativity and would see the role of a flavorist remaining attractive and satisfying for the foreseeable future. Which camp exhibits the better judgment? Is the creative cup half full or half empty? Clearly the majority of flavorists would join the first camp, suspecting that our profession has started to slide slowly backwards. I do not agree. I am firmly in the second camp. I certainly enjoy being a contrarian, but how can I possibly actually defend my opinion?

Technological Advances: Pros and Cons

I was unquestionably fortunate to start my career as a flavorist at a time when

modern analytical techniques were just beginning to prove invaluable. Within a few short years, the palette of ingredients seemed to expand almost exponentially. Not only were there many more chemicals to play with, but many of them were vastly superior to their predecessors. Many highly successful new creations were underpinned simply by an exaggerated level of a single new ingredient: a “silver bullet.” Perhaps this was actually a Golden Age.

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Almost every natural food appears to contain an inexhaustible profusion of flavor chemicals. As analytical techniques improve and new levels of details are investigated, more and more new components emerge. The problem is that, as levels of detection delve progressively lower, the proportion of flavor chemicals that make any contribution at all to the overall character of the food decreases quite steeply. We have certainly not reached the end of useful analytical research into natural foods, but we are probably not really seeing good financial returns from this research and will certainly find very few new silver bullets. This argument would seem to support the position of the first camp, that we are reaching the sad end of a Golden Age of flavor creation.

Analytical techniques also feature in the next powerful argument from the first camp. They, entirely reasonably, claim that the ability to use analysis to match competitive flavors would seem

to diminish the value of creativity and threaten to make flavors little more than a commodity. I will first try to answer these two very real arguments. Firstly, take raw materials. The useful palette of chemicals available to flavorists has certainly expanded vastly, driven by the analysis of nature, but that is not the only way to conduct research into new flavor ingredients. As we gain a better understanding of the mechanisms involved in odor perception, especially of primary odors, we should be able to apply the type of techniques that have worked in the pharmaceutical industry to aroma chemicals. Instead of merely trying to look to nature for inspiration, we should eventually be able to surpass nature. These techniques are beginning to yield results in the admittedly less complicated area of taste chemicals. Research is not about to reach a dead end, it will probably simply change direction.

The second argument is easier to negate. Analytical techniques alone, even now, will rarely suffice to produce a credible match. They are simply a part of a creative process, providing input, but not a ready-made solution. In any case, if one looks on supermarket shelves, one will see very few consumer food products containing flavors that have been replaced by matches. Not surprisingly, the push in any successful food company is directed toward increasing consumer acceptability.

A Case for the Golden Age

Having at least diminished the arguments of the first camp, I should now try to present my own case. The first argument looks at the creative palette. In the days before modern analytical techniques, there was a fairly restricted number of ingredients that could be used by a flavorist in any

specific flavor, such as strawberry. Perhaps 20 ingredients would be in the “very useful” category, plus another 50 or so that could sometimes be used in a minor role.

Today, those numbers are about four times greater. To argue that this state of affairs diminishes creativity is perverse; it actually enhances the possibilities of creativity immensely. The variations on creative profiles that can be imagined today are vastly higher than they were before and during the second half of the 20th century. Despite this, most F&F companies have not yet explored even a fraction of the newly available creative labyrinths, and prefer to stay relatively constrained within comfortable, familiar territory.

The second argument challenges the F&F industry to take a hard look at which parts of the business actually adds value in the current industrial climate. Such introspection was not really essential until recently, and image was perceived to be at least on a par with reality. This is no longer the case, and companies that wish to survive cannot afford to waste resources. Any disinterested analysis would put the creative function at the top of the added-value list. In a relative sense, creativity is more important today than it has ever been in the past.

The third argument is more pragmatic than idealistic, but it is important nonetheless. When I joined the industry, every company was hiring trainees, and most had decent training programs. Many more trainees were hired than eventually became flavorists. It was a highly competitive environment. The unsuccessful trainees generally moved on to successful careers in areas such as sales, where they could put their training to good use. The successful flavorists often became highly successful, partly because of competitive pressures and partly because the successful companies were able to expand rapidly in the business environment. Unfortunately, those highly successful flavorists often dominated the industry indeed, and it was hard for many in the next generation to grow or shine in such company.

The new generation of flavorists will have to show the resilience to overcome

barriers to hiring and will also have to train themselves to some extent, although they will have an unparalleled opportunity to shine in a world where they will be more unique and sought-after than ever before. This creates a big opportunity for the new generation of flavorists.

The first generation of modern flavorists are now heading toward retirement, and good flavorists can increasingly name their price. They will enjoy a new Golden Age.

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