

The nose knows: Scents of history

Nothing is more memorable than a smell. One scent can be unexpected, momentary and fleeting, yet conjure up a childhood summer beside a lake in the mountains.

??Diane Ackerman

We all come into this world pretty much the same.

From our safe, warm, aquatic incubators, we were presented to the cold, open world. In a shocking transition, we entered this huge, loud, bright environment where we spend the rest of our days.

As infants, we're totally helpless creatures who depend entirely on our guardians to keep us warm, safe and fed.

What's fascinating is that we're complete packages, even before entering the world. We have all of our fingers and toes, and a complete set of senses. Our sense of smell and taste are fully developed, and strongest, at birth, unlike others that develop over the first year of life.

Our sense of smell impacts our brains, memories, emotions and tastes.

Olfaction has many purposes, such as detecting hazards, pheromones, and food.

It integrates with other senses to form the sense of flavor. Olfaction occurs when odorants bind to specific sites on olfactory receptors located in the nasal cavity. Signals from these receptors transmit them to the olfactory bulb, where the sensory input will start to interact with parts of the brain responsible for smell identification, memory, and emotion.

The process by which olfactory information is coded in the brain to allow for proper perception is still being researched, and is not completely understood.

Another of life's mysteries. Our bodies, despite the fact we're prone to breakdown, illness and wear and tear, are remarkable things.

Why is the sense of smell linked to our memories? What is clear is that there are certain smells that can trigger very specific memories that can affect how we feel. Therefore, smells have an emotional component, which is so very human.

Smell is a potent wizard that transports you across thousands of miles and all the years you have lived.

??elen Keller

Who doesn't love the smell of freshly-baked bread??A poll listing Britain's top 50 favourite smells lists it as No. 1.

I will never forget one instance, during a Grade 8 field trip to Quebec. The bus stopped at a road-side bakery, operated by a group of nuns. OMG, you could smell those bread ovens for miles! We ran out of the bus like Pavlov sounded our dinner bell. The best fresh

bread, ever!

In the survey, the irresistible aroma beat bacon, newly-mown grass and coffee to the title, in a survey of 2,000 UK adults.

The top 10 was rounded out by cakes baking in the oven, the seaside, just laundered clothes, a Sunday roast, fish and chips and fresh flowers.

Stranger scents to make the top 50 included rain (28), new books (31), gasoline (36) and matches (37).

Fresh coffee has to be another huge favourite. There's nothing quite like it and it sends a signal that a new day has begun and it's time for a hearty breakfast.

As we enter the summer cottage season, who doesn't love the smell of gasoline and outboard motors? I don't know what it is, but boy, it makes me smile and feel quite relaxed.

A similar smell, from the exhaust of classic muscle cars, has the same grin-causing effect on yours truly, and my teenage son.

Weird, because if you spill a few drops at the pump, it has the opposite reaction.

One smell that I will never get tired of is that odd, moldy, damp, salty smell of hotel carpets in the Caribbean. Undoubtedly caused by the salty air from the ocean, it grabs me like nothing else. When I catch a whiff of this odor, my brain lights up like a pinball machine, and whisks me away to St. Maarten, Freeport or Puerto Plata.

My wife Kim and I managed to get away a few times before we "settled down," and those times were simply amazing. I often pull out those key chain photos taken by hotel photographers, that show us grinning, from ear to ear. Boy did we look good!

It is interesting that a well-developed sense of smell is also a defence mechanism.

We know to panic when we smell smoke or the "rotten egg" additives in natural gas. Burning plastic is another cause for alarm.

Of course, there is a direct link to smells and tastes. If you plug your nose, it limits your taste of flavours. I know that apple cider vinegar is good for you, but many can't stand the smell, or the taste. Plug your nose and swallow!

They say you can't really enjoy a meal if your sniffer is clogged.

"Nothing can beat the smell of dew and flowers and the odor that comes out of

the earth when the sun goes down."

" Ethel Waters

Yes, I have smelled the wind, sunsets and wet dog at the end of a summer's day.

Incredible!

There is a lot of tragedy and uncertainty in our world. But we have been given some wonderful gifts " our senses in all their glory.

Follow your nose, I say. Spark up the BBQ and let the aroma carry on the winds of summer.