

VALUABLE SMELLS

Grasse—City of Perfume

HOW many pre-war men, standing diffidently at a cosmetics counter to purchase a bottle of scent for their wives or sweethearts, inquired whether the perfume was natural or synthetic? For that matter, how many women using that perfume wondered where it came from? They would have found that much of it was produced in Grasse, a small town in the South of France that has been in the news lately.

Grasse was one of the first cities to be occupied when the Allied forces landed on the Mediterranean coast of France. It is very probable that our troops found something other than the "city of perfume and flowers" as it used to be known. For Grasse was the centre of the perfume industry in France, and before the Russian Revolution whole fields of violets were grown there to supply the Empress of Russia, who used only violet perfume.

The old town of Grasse, built down on the plain, has streets so narrow that not even carts can pass through them, but the newer part on the hill is more modern, and looks out over the plains to Cannes. To the sun and the peaceful climate here come people suffering from lung trouble.

A large proportion of the people living in Grasse work at the many perfume factories of the city — one of the best known being the Molinard—and those who live in the surrounding districts are engaged in growing the flowers—violets, jonquils, roses, orange-flowers, thyme, rosemary, myrtle, tuberose, jasmine, lavender and geranium. Lavender is an important item in the perfume industry in Southern France, and in the evening cartloads of it can be seen being brought down from the mountains. It is picked during the day, and has to be distilled the same night before it has a chance to ferment. One of the favourite perfumes in Paris, Cuir de Russie (Russian Leather), comes from Grasse. It is prepared from a lichen that grows on the oak trees in the South of France, and is a strong and very expensive scent.

Working With Their Noses

Much more costly, however, is the Attar of Roses, for which Grasse is famed. Worth about £1000 a litre, it is not sold to individuals, but used, in infinitesimal quantities, as a base for other perfumes. This essence of roses is so valuable that it is kept under lock and key, and each bottle is packed in sawdust, so that, if it should break, the sawdust would absorb the perfume and could then be redistilled. Most of it was exported to the United States, which was the best customer before the war.

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b—b—Market"—these are the kind of people who decry the Government officials and members of Parliament as incompetent scoundrels.

So it occurred to me that it is now time, when reconstruction is the word sipped with morning tea, to take the slow trains and see the country living, for the Express leads to hasty conclusions. What do you think?

When America was feeling the depression in the early 'thirties, the industry of Grasse dropped about 50 per cent. but it revived, and was thriving so well that many of the large owners were millionaires.

Synthetic perfumes are produced elsewhere in France, but with its abundance of flowers Grasse is famous for its natural perfumes, and although many skilled chemists are employed, they work only with their noses. They are specially trained to smell, and their whole day is spent testing mixtures by smelling.

In olden times flower-shaped pendants were made with a scented paste inside them, and French ladies carried their scent around in the form of a paste in a small container very like lipstick. That, however, was in the days of Fragonard, the world-famed French painter, who came from Grasse, and whose small pictures are now worth over £3000, and hang mainly in museums. To-day the women of France have more serious things than perfume to occupy their minds, but Grasse looks ahead to the time when she will again be the "city of perfume and flowers."



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