

SPAIN DISPATCH

The Intimate and the Universal: ‘What Life Really Smells Like’

By NICHOLAS CASEY

CAP DE CREUS, Spain — Of all those wishing a swift end to the pandemic, few have reasons as obsessed with the olfactory as Ernesto Collado, an actor turned fragrance maker whose workshop sits in a village in the north-east corner of Spain.

The pandemic brought masks, which severed humanity from its sense of smell, “the sublime which is right here,” as Mr. Collado calls it. And it brought the possibility that the virus could leave him unable to smell anything, which had happened to him briefly years ago and caused a kind of existential crisis.

Then there was the future of his smelling tours, which he pioneered in his native Catalonia, and which, for a time, had seemed under threat as well.

The tours were back, for now, and Mr. Collado was recently with a group that had followed him to the top of a hill in Cap de Creus, a rocky headland above a dark blue sea about 15 miles south of France. They stopped at a wild rosemary bush, where he crushed a sprig between his hands and told the visitors to inhale.

“Smell goes directly to your emotions, you are crying, you don’t know why,” Mr. Collado expounded as the others leaned in. “Smelling has a power that none of the other senses have, and I must tell you now, it is molecular, it goes to the essence of the essence.”

Mr. Collado pointed to the man beside him. A hot breeze from the cliffs moved millions of molecules between them suddenly.

“When I smell him, in reality I am entering into a level of intimacy more intense than if we slept in bed together,” he said.

The rocky shore where the perfumer walked, and philosophized, is best known as the backdrop of paintings by the Surrealist Salvador Dalí, and Mr. Collado, in his own way, sees himself as an artist leading a movement too. He aims to recover what he calls “smelling culture.”

“What is that plant?” asked a woman passing by.

Mr. Collado stood in front of a mangy bush with a crisp, earthy odor. It was loved, he said, by the monks of Sant Pere de Rodes, a ruined monastery up the cape who put it in their tea.

It was vitex agnus-castus, also known as the “chaste tree.” That was ironic, Mr. Collado said, because it was also “possibly the aromatic plant with the most aphrodisiac power in all of the Mediterranean Basin.”

The woman pulled some leaves and thrust them at her husband. “Take it,” she said.

The world does not lack scents, Mr. Collado believed. But it lacks authentic scents. Chanel No. 5, meant to evoke rose and

Roser Toll Pifarré contributed reporting from Barcelona.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY SAMUEL ARANDA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



Ernesto Collado, an actor turned fragrance maker, in his lab in Catalonia, and leading one of his smelling tours in the region. Smell “is molecular,” he says; “it goes to the essence of the essence.”



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jasmine, is also laced with synthetic compounds. Few people know the scent of real vanilla anymore, he lamented, having only artificial flavoring.

“We have never had so many fragrances around us,” Mr. Collado said, one afternoon in his home. “But at the same time, we have no idea of what life really smells like.”

As Mr. Collado sees it, this has to do with the fact that unlike what he called our more “privi-

leged” senses like sight and hearing, smell has been pushed aside, “absolutely denigrated through centuries because smell reminds us that we are just animals,” he said.

He launched into a brief history of smell: how the root of the word “perfume” means “smoke” in Latin, a reference, he imagines, to juniper burned by cave men; how the colonization of the New World flooded Europe with the previously unknown scents

of chocolate and coffee; and how the grimy smells of London and Paris during the Industrial Revolution marked a turning point.

“There came this sudden obsession with sterilizing and disinfecting,” he said, adding, “now everyone must smell absolutely neutral.”

Mr. Collado has tried to create real world smells in his fragrance factory, where he draws inspiration from Catalan nature. His company’s name, Bravanariz,

translates to something like “brave nose” in Spanish.

Part storeroom, part laboratory, it sits on the bottom floor of his home in a stony village, Pontós, north of Barcelona. There are cologne bottles and vats of oily liquids — but please, don’t call any of it “perfume.”

“These are olfactory captures,” Mr. Collado sniffed.

If Dalí painted melting clocks with these same landscapes in the background, then Mr. Collado has made the scent of this scenery his subject. He harvests rockrose, a Mediterranean shrub with evergreen leaves and white petals. He makes a tincture out of sea fennel, an edible plant that has a salty tang recalling the ocean.

He mixes these and other scents together to produce Cala, a fragrance he sells.

Rotten seaweed pulled from the shore and resin pressed from lentisk, a tree mentioned in “Don Quixote,” are also part of his quest for local scents.

“His fragrances hit you here,” said Juan Carlos Moreno, an amateur perfume maker, smacking his chest hard.

Mr. Moreno said he cried the first time he smelled one of Mr. Collado’s fragrances. It was Muga, a scent, that, according to its marketing material, may cause one to “sense the silent sexuality of rosemary, immortelle, thyme and lavender.”

Mr. Collado grew up hearing tales about perfume from his grandfather, José Collado Herrero, who formulated some of Spain’s best-selling perfumes in the early 20th century. But Mr. Collado first made his name as an actor on Spanish television, and as a theater director.

The turning point came when Mr. Collado began to experience phantosmia, a condition also known as olfactory hallucination. He lost his ability to smell except for a single, unpleasant scent that seemed to surface on everything, even his children.

Mr. Collado was told he would have to relearn how to smell through practice, much like a stroke patient must learn how to talk again.

He began with a sprig of rosemary.

“For two or three weeks there was nothing,” he said. “But then one day the smell got to my brain, and I was immediately brought back to childhood, it was like someone smacked me in the face.”

Mr. Collado trained himself to smell the other plants around his home. It was the start of an obsession that led him not just to mixing his own fragrances, but to becoming a kind of evangelist of the nose itself.

On a hot summer afternoon, Mr. Collado was out in another landscape whose scent he was seeking to capture.

In this field, stretching to the foothills of the Pyrenees, there was Spanish lavender and rosemary, used for the “head notes” of his scents — what you smell after you first put a fragrance on. And there was the flower known as immortelle, which forms “middle notes,” whose scent remain after the first vanish. A plant called jara, cleared by farmers as a weed, was what scent makers call a “fixative,” used to slow the rate of evaporation.

He grabbed a bunch of dry leaves and crushed them between his palms.

“I formulate with my hands and what I have here is almost a perfume,” he said as he extended the leaves for a whiff.

His approach is the exact opposite of what most perfumers do, he said. They isolate scents, making something artificial. He combines them, embracing the strange smells of it all.

“Why I do this is because there is nothing more complex than nature,” he said. “We should be complex, but we have a problem with accepting our complexity and contradiction in ourselves.”

A Fox News Firebrand Visits Hungary to Laud Its Authoritarian Leader

By BENJAMIN NOVAK and MICHAEL M. GRYNBAUM

BUDAPEST — It’s been a meeting of conservative fellow travelers: a jovial host — who heads an authoritarian government bent on targeting liberal institutions, including universities, the judiciary and the media — and his American guest exchanging grins.

In a week in which he broadcast nightly from Budapest, the American talk show host Tucker Carlson posed for pictures with and interviewed Hungary’s authoritarian leader, Viktor Orban, and took a helicopter to inspect a Hungarian border fence designed to keep out migrants.

The visit by Mr. Carlson, the top-rated host on the Rupert Murdoch-owned Fox News, bolsters Mr. Orban’s mission to establish Budapest as an ideological center for what he sees as an international conservative movement.

For Mr. Carlson, the Hungary trip was an opportunity to put Mr. Orban, whom he admires, on the map for his viewers back home, a conservative audience that may be open to the sort of illiberalism promoted by the Hungarian leader. On Wednesday’s show, Mr. Carlson praised Hungary as a “small country with a lot of lessons for the rest of us.”

Mr. Carlson’s Fox News program espouses some hard-right views, especially on immigration, where he and Mr. Orban share

common ground. The host has held up Hungary’s hard-line policy on rejecting asylum seekers as a model for an American immigration system that he believes is too lenient and has weakened the power of native-born citizens, an argument that Mr. Carlson’s critics say overlaps with white supremacist ideology.

A onetime foreign correspondent for American magazines, Mr. Carlson is also an instinctive television showman with an ear for provocation. His friendly interview with Mr. Orban has prompted a raft of think pieces in the English-speaking media that, while mostly critical of Mr. Carlson, have given the Hungarian leader a new round of international coverage.

In the United States, Fox News viewers are tuning in: This week’s broadcasts of “Tucker Carlson Tonight” attracted roughly three million viewers a night, handily beating the competition on CNN and MSNBC.

Mr. Carlson’s visit comes as the populist Mr. Orban has become increasingly isolated and is in a precarious position, at home and abroad, over his government’s backsliding on democracy and his administration’s poor handling of the coronavirus pandemic.

Mr. Carlson’s positive outlook on Hungary is not shared by many across the European Union, where Mr. Orban is often regarded as a far-right strongman who has badly weakened democratic institutions, cozier up to Beijing and Moscow, and steered public assets to his allies.

Mr. Orban’s party is now being challenged by a six-party opposi-



Tucker Carlson, left, broadcast nightly from Budapest last week with Prime Minister Viktor Orban.

tion coalition in elections scheduled for next year.

In an interview with Mr. Carlson that aired last Thursday, Mr. Orban said he expected an effort by the “international left” to oust him next year.

To rally support from his conservative base, he has immersed himself in the culture wars that have roiled U.S. politics, and in which Mr. Carlson has also been an eager participant, regularly railing against liberals.

Mr. Orban’s party recently adopted a law restricting depictions of homosexuality; critics said it was being used to target the country’s L.G.B.T.Q. community. And the government-aligned media regularly rails against the destabilizing effect that Western “woke” culture has on traditional society.

By moving billions of dollars’ worth of cash and assets into

quasi-private educational foundations controlled by his allies, analysts say, Mr. Orban is setting up an ideological control center, bolstered by paid conservative thinkers from Europe and North America living in Budapest.

Several European and American conservative public intellectuals have already answered Mr. Orban’s call.

The American author and journalist Rod Dreher, who writes for The American Conservative (for which Mr. Carlson sits on an advisory board), has been in Hungary since April, thanks to a paid fellowship at an institute funded by Mr. Orban’s government.

Hungary was also a focus for another American conservative, Stephen K. Bannon, President Donald J. Trump’s former adviser, who traveled to Europe to work with Mr. Orban and other nationalist populist parties ahead of the

2019 elections for the European Parliament. Mr. Bannon’s efforts fizzled, partly because of the difficulty reconciling competing national priorities among the continent’s different nationalist parties.

Mr. Carlson himself has a family connection with the Hungarian leader — his father, Richard Carlson, is listed as a director of a Washington-based firm that has lobbied for Mr. Orban in the United States.

In 2019, the firm, Policy Impact Strategic Communications, disclosed in a lobbying filing that it “coordinated an interview of Minister Szijjarto on the Tucker Carlson show,” referring to Peter Szijjarto, Hungary’s minister of foreign affairs and trade.

William Nixon, the firm’s chairman and chief executive, said in an interview that Mr. Carlson’s father — a former journalist, media

executive and American ambassador — was not involved in arranging the interview with the foreign minister, and is neither an investor nor an employee of the firm. A filing shows that the firm’s contract with the Hungarian government ended in late 2019.

Mr. Nixon said the firm had no role in arranging Mr. Carlson’s trip this week to Hungary. Fox News said Mr. Carlson’s father “is retired and had nothing to do” with the visit or the meeting with Mr. Orban. “Tucker and his team booked the interview, and the expenses were covered by Fox News,” the network said in a statement.

Last Wednesday, Mr. Carlson rode a military helicopter to Hungary’s southern border with Serbia to inspect the chain-link fence Mr. Orban’s government erected in 2015 to keep migrants from entering the country. He praised the government’s efforts.

Mr. Carlson was also slated to speak at a youth event on Saturday hosted by a “talent management” institute on which Mr. Orban’s government has lavished billions. And he is filming a documentary about Hungary during his stay there, which is slated to air on Fox Nation, Fox News’s subscription streaming service.

Even as Mr. Orban is increasingly shunned by many European conservatives, Mr. Carlson has been effusive in his praise, depicting the Hungarian leader as a virtuous champion of family values and a model for the United States.

Since the deadly riot in Washington on Jan. 6, when a pro-Trump mob stormed the Capitol, Mr. Orban’s appeal has increased among American conservatives, who have increasingly found common cause with authoritarian governments, said Dalibor Rohac, a senior fellow with the American Enterprise Institute.

Traditionally, he said, “the conservative disposition was a distrust of power and imposition of checks and balances — that’s been eroded in Hungary.”

Benjamin Novak reported from Budapest, and Michael M. Grynbaum from New York. Kenneth P. Vogel contributed reporting from Washington.