

## **A JOURNEY OF SCENT**

**A happy childhood in Morocco and an excellent education in France shaped Carlos Benaim's path as a successful perfumer. This particular path also encouraged him to support others, who are less fortunate, through his involvement in the ISEF Foundation**

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Carlos Benaim has come a long way from his early childhood in Tangier, the Moroccan port city by the Strait of Gibraltar, to securing the position of senior perfumer for International Flavors & Fragrances - as well as Chairman of ISEF, a Foundation supporting Israeli students. His path has led him through several continents, organizations, institutions, designers and celebrities, while at the same time prompting him to help young Israelis from disadvantaged backgrounds by enabling them to receive the benefits of higher education. Benaim sees the scents he was exposed to as a child and teen in Morocco as a source of deep influence on his professional work. Grateful for the blessings in his life, he feels the need to give back and reach out to the new generation in Israel and help them fulfill their potential.

Carlos Shalom Benaim, 66, was raised in an international city, a symbol of coexistence in those years. "People of different religions lived together in harmony. The police force was equally composed of Jews, Muslims, and Christians; and the police inspector, whose last name was Israel, was the father of a friend of mine. My own name, Carlos, reflects the Spanish influence in this area," says Benaim.

His father, originally from the city Tétouan in northern Morocco, was a pharmacist educated at the University of Madrid. He also dealt with the distillation of plants which served the pharmaceutical as well as the perfume industry. "It was an unusual occupation at the time, and I had never imagined becoming a perfumer," he says.

"Smells are things you treasure for a lifetime. As a young boy, I would often accompany my grandfather to the marketplace in Tangier, and I remember the smells of the spices and fruits, oranges, peaches, melons and apricots. It is engraved in my memory."

### **What would you have done if your family had immigrated to Israel?**

"I would have pursued a profession, perhaps becoming a historian, but in any case I don't believe I would have worked as a perfumer since the industry was not very developed in Israel and I highly doubt that I would have become successful there," he laughs and continues in a serious tone: "In Morocco we always knew we had to pursue a higher education in order to advance in our careers anywhere in the world."

"Many of my peers studied engineering in France. It was a matter of survival. Having a professional was a necessity. I remember summer vacations where all my friends would spend the day at the beach while I would visit various libraries in the city." Benaim learned eight languages independently, three of which - French, Spanish and English - he speaks fluently. He would also read an entire book in one day. "I was always looking to learn something new. I remember working one summer for a photo development lab and eventually purchasing the equipment so I could do it myself."

After graduating from high school, Benaim moved to France to pursue two degrees, in Chemistry and Chemical Engineering. Upon graduation Benaim intended to return to Morocco and open an independent business, but he was suddenly faced with an unexpected reality: the Six-Day War had broken out in Israel, and Morocco, like many Arab countries, was no longer safe for Jews. His father sent him a message telling him not to return to Morocco. The young Carlos had to find his way in the world by himself.

"I joined the perfume company International Flavors & Fragrances and found myself working all over the world: in the Netherlands, Paris, ,and even in Buenos Aires, where my family had eventually settled. Finally, I moved to New York."

### **SCENTS FROM THE PAST**

Benaim is married to a psychoanalyst and they have three children: an opera singer who became a real estate entrepreneur, a writer, and a speechwriter for the U.S. State

Department. Carlos and his wife live on the Upper West Side, and his offices and lab are located in midtown Manhattan.

Among Benaim's creations: Calvin Klein's Eternity, Ralph Lauren's Polo, Giorgio Armani's Emporio Armani White, and Code Donna. He has created perfumes for such major brands as Dior, Zara, Liz Claiborne, Prada, Bulgari, Carolina Herrera, and Donna Karan, as well as singer Mariah Carey and rapper Sean "P. Diddy" Combs.

"In fact, my work is composed of a mix of art and science. I use the memories of scents that have made a strong impression on me in my life - the visits at the marketplace as a child, my father's work and so forth. I have a growing repertoire of scents in my head, on top of which are added the ingredients I discover during my work here, which help to develop my imagination. I am talking about thousands of ingredients: extracts of plants, fruits and flowers, mostly flowers. Spices from Morocco and India and more. You utilize all this in creating the scent that will communicate the message the particular client is looking to project. The work is mostly about linking the scents to the imagination through trial and error."

**But your personal memories and the scents you have been exposed to do not necessarily match those of many others in the world.**

"Very true, they are as different as can be. The question is, 'How else would you express yourself?' You try to understand the people, the profession, the milestones in the industry. You try to create a fragrance that will appeal to the public. We have many employees working on research in China, Brazil, France and New York. There are various techniques to help you decipher people's emotional reactions to smells, colors. Creating a perfume is like writing a book, it is telling a story through scents."

An important element in Benaim's work, especially when working on women's perfumes, is the trail of the fragrance left after the woman passes by. The French call it *sillage*. "It's extremely important. That is how people remember scents, particularly in this country - when a woman passes by and the scent is felt around her as a unique musical chord composed of a set of smells."

### **What is important to fashion designers who ask to create a *sillage* effect?**

"Each has their own aspirations. They want to add something to the brand but stay consistent and loyal to their style, fashion, and story. I see it as drawing a portrait of a person—you cannot use your personal emotions alone, but should represent the persons themselves and what they are about. Armani is different from Yves Saint Laurent, and so on. Generally speaking, there is no such thing as 'the right summer fragrance'. There are many summer fragrances, but you can generalize and say that in warmer climates and countries, you would rather wear the lighter, fresher, citrusy scents."

The first perfume that established Benaim as a successful perfumer was Ralph Lauren's Polo. "I was in my early thirties and didn't know what kind of effect the perfume I created would have," he recalls.

Another hit was Calvin Klein's Eternity. "It became a classic. I was asked to create a perfume that would convey a sense of embrace, but would also have a 'Wow!' effect."

### **Honestly, don't you have the urge, at times, to criticize designers for their over-articulated descriptions?**

Benaim smiles: "Hmm... I always listen to people. Everyone has their own way of expressing themselves and I understand that. Personally, I love hearing these explanations. Maybe it's curiosity, but working in this business, you find yourself exposed to the kind of life and people you otherwise would never have encountered. You need to sit with them and listen to them, even if their explanations do not make sense to you."

### **Financial benefits aside, why are celebrities interested in having a fragrance created in their name?**

"This is their way of expressing themselves, to seek their place in society. The perfume becomes a very personal product for some, while others don't take it as seriously, but simply use the perfume to help establish their image in the industry. I once flew to Elizabeth Taylor's home in Beverly Hills. I decided to do something a little different working with a celebrity: I took ten different scents and numbered them. I tested her to

see if she would choose the same fragrances she claimed were her favorites. She reluctantly agreed to go ahead with my little experiment, and she was right every single time! Her favorite flower was the Narcissus Flower . She loved strong, opulent scents."

### **Sending a child out into the world**

Every project takes about a year or two from initial concept to marketing. He works on many different projects at one time. When I wonder about possible confusion while mixing different scents and concepts, he laughs: "You just inhale before you move to the next project. Our brain has the ability to block strong scents if they are constantly around you. My sense of smell becomes more and more subtle as time goes by, and I become more aware of the small details. When I release a product, I feel as if I send my child out into the world, the street, watching how they conduct themselves. It feels good when you walk down the street and you smell your creation on someone."

### **So the first thing you notice is always the smell...**

Benaim laughs: "The shoes... but you'd be surprised to know how profoundly a woman's smell affects you, whether you are aware of it or not. Smell is something I notice right away, it's part of what a person radiates. One chooses a fragrance for specific reasons, and I find it very telling. Did you put on a subtler or flashier fragrance? Smells awaken deep emotions, and our reactions to them can be very powerful. Creating fragrances for women is always more difficult, challenging and interesting, since your selection of ingredients is richer. The variety is considerably smaller and the scents are simpler when it comes to creating fragrances for men."

### **Do you justify the high prices in stores?**

"The industry was affected by the financial crisis, but I feel it has almost recovered completely since. And yes, I do feel the prices are fair, since these are creative products of good quality. When you buy a suit made of a unique fabric and tailored by a good designer, it makes you feel different, unlike some random suit you bought somewhere... Good fragrances made out of good ingredients are worth it."

### **What kind of a perfume would you create for yourself?**

"I am a complex person. There are many different elements, not only my profession, that make me who I am. It is the whole package, including my background, my family, my values, and what I carry with me. I have a legacy I want to leave behind for future generations. My favorite perfume is 'Herrera for Men', which I designed. At the time, the perfume was considered a breakthrough in the industry, and today it's considered a classic. Had I designed a perfume for myself, I would have created a mix of the things I love: noble materials, freshness, citrus, Mediterranean plants, warm qualities and vanilla flavors. I have a lot to choose from."

### **CATCHING HISTORY**

While occupied with the fragrances to come, Benaim has been dedicating his time and energy to the ISEF Foundation, where he serves as the Chairman of the Board of Directors. This international organization was founded by **Nina Weiner** and financed by the banker **Edmond Safra**. ISEF's vision is to help young Israelis of underprivileged backgrounds fulfill their potential by awarding them scholarships for higher education.

"I was very fortunate, and so were many of my friends who had the opportunity to study at universities. Many other Moroccans my age who immigrated to Israel didn't have that privilege. It has always bothered me, and that is why I wanted to be involved in Sephardic organizations. That is how I got to ISEF, initially as a donor. The vision of ISEF has been very important to me. I was lucky - my children went to Harvard and Yale. I felt I had the ability to change young people's lives in Israel. Had this possibility existed back in the day, we would have seen an entirely different Israeli society today. There is a realization today, more and more in the past decade, that a lot of potential has been left behind. For the past 35 years, we have been actively pursuing our goal, and to date we have awarded 17,000 scholarships. We are only a small organization, but imagine if we could support everyone: Israel would transform completely. We are simply trying to catch history."

Benaim visits Israel twice a year, mostly on behalf of ISEF. He obviously takes the

matter to heart: "I feel that enjoying recognition from one's society is extremely important, and I am certain the parents of the young people we help didn't have that chance. Moreover, these young people were robbed of a valuable psychological element - having respect for their parents. This is one of the major problems as I see it. It's a long story, and this is one of the profound, long-term consequences of that period in history. ISEF functions as an organization whose alumni are concerned to reach out to the next generation – not only within the Sephardic community, but to all disadvantaged communities in Israel. As history demonstrates, young people whose parents come from disadvantaged backgrounds are susceptible to encounter more difficulties in their future, which they will pass onto their children, and so on. We need to break this vicious cycle, and it's difficult."