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COLOGNE, GERMANY—I couldn't take my eyes off his nose.

This was a snoot so sensitive it could discern a person's country and occupation "with his eyes closed," according to a book I bought at the Cologne, Germany, tourist office. Clearly, this man was—and I mean this in the nicest possible way—a human bloodhound.

He was also the inventor of eau de cologne.

I was at Farina House, a museum-cum-shop in Cologne, face to face (and yes, nose to nose) with a painting of Johann Maria Farina who, say most sources, created cologne in this city along the Rhine, some 300 years ago.

Born in Italy in 1685, Farina learned the ancient art of perfume-making from his grandmother, moved to Cologne, fashioned a delicate new scent in 1708 and named it in honour of his adopted hometown. In 1709, he set up the fragrance company.

Eight generations later, the company is still in the hands of the Farina family. Who are still making the original citrusy fragrance. Still using the secret formula.

"Here is my business card," said Johann Maria Farina, the current managing director of the legendary perfume house, who holds the same name as his scent-inventing ancestor. (His nose, however, appears a tad more rounded than his ancestor's.) The card read: "The World's Oldest Fragrance Company."

We were chatting in the store section of Farina House, where shoppers of all ages and both sexes, tried their own noses on various samplers. Surrounding him, on shelves, tables and counter, were flacons of the historic cologne, most dressed up in bright red boxes, ready for sale.

He suggested, "Why don't you take the audio tour of our museum?"

In the same imposing building as the shop, the three-story museum traces the tale of Cologne's cologne heritage.

It's a history that's far from simple. But plenty entertaining. And it'd make a great movie, a storyline stuffed with centuries-old rivalries, eccentric characters, and the grooming habits of some of history's high and mighty.

Anyway, before I'd even stepped foot into Farina House, I knew it wasn't the only famous cologne in town.

While Farina might be the oldest, a cologne called No. 4711 is the most popular. A huge 4711 sign greets arrivals at the city's train station. Throughout the Old Town section of this 2,000 year-old city, shops showcase 4711 in their windows. A visitor might think 4711 was the only sniff in town.

To get the lowdown on these two eau-de-cologne dynasties, I needed to make a pilgrimage to both Farina House and the 4711 home shop, to ferret out the personalities behind these storied brands, rivals since the late 18th century.

[Farina's Fragrance Museum](#) was my first stop, and as I wandered around displays of antique perfume bottles, exhibits on fragrance forgeries and a reproduction of a distillation room, the self-guided audio tour explains why Farina's fragrance was called "cologne" instead of Köln, the name Germans call this city.

"Three hundred years ago," said the CD guide, "French was spoken by the upper classes from Southern Italy to Northern England. French was also the language of trade." And so the French word for the city, "Cologne," was used.



Johann Maria Farina, the eighth-generation descendant of the creator of eau de cologne, holds a bottle of the fragrance in Farina House in Cologne, Germany. They've been using the same recipe for 303 years.

Susan farlow photo/for the toronto star

In the 18th century, fragrance was a luxury item. Before long, Farina's cologne was being shipped to royal houses throughout Europe.

Records show Napoleon used a bottle a day. The little guy supposedly even had special boots made so he could stash a bottle of Farina cologne for dabbing on the go. A wall-hanging in the shop rattles off other rich and famous customers of yore, including: Queen Victoria, Empress Maria Theresa, Mozart, Voltaire and Louis XV and XVI. More recent users: Princess Diana, Marlene Dietrich and Bill Clinton.

For most of the 1700s, eau de cologne was a term used solely for Farina's scent. But because there was no such thing as trademarks in those days, eventually hundreds of competitors sprang up using the term eau de cologne and even the name Farina.

One such competitor was a local merchant named Wilhelm Muelhens. The story goes that Muelhens received a secret fragrance recipe as a wedding gift from a Carthusian monk. In 1792, he went into the cologne business, adopting the Farina name.

The original Farina company retaliated with court battles. Finally, in 1881, a ban was set forbidding competitors from using the Farina name. And so, Muelhens changed his company's brand to No. 4711, naming it after the firm's street address: 4711 Glockengasse.

Four blocks from the Farina House stands the [4711 flagship store](#), a white creation that resembles a fairy tale fort. Outside a crowd was gathered, their eyes riveted toward the building's roof.

"They are here to see the glockenspiel," said Sabina, my guide. And as the hour struck, a chorus line of spiffy soldiers whirled above the clock to the tune of Le Marseillaise.

Inside the elegant shop, women were whirling around displays of 4711 colognes, soaps, even t-shirts and umbrellas, most packaged in the brand's signature colours of turquoise and gold. Up on the mezzanine, a half-dozen exhibits tell the story of 4711's nearly 220-year-old history.

But the main attraction stood at the building's entrance: a non-stop fountain of cologne. With the popular scent filling the air inside and out, women, young and old, ran their hands through the liquid as friends captured the moment on camera.

Watching the women, my husband finally put in his two cents about our sniffing safari. "You know, the story of cologne is a travelogue: Italian creator, German birthplace, French name."

And I'd thought he hadn't been paying attention.

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JUST THE FACTS

FARINA HOUSE: combining a fragrance museum and shop, it's at 21 Obenmarspforten, across the street from City Hall. Museum hours: Mon-Sat 10 to 6; Sunday 11 to 4. Admission: 5 euros.

Website: <http://www.farina.eu/> E-mail: museum@farina-haus.de

4711 ORIGINAL EAU DE COLOGNE: the flagship store and gallery is at 4711 Glockengasse. Hours: Mon – Fri, 9 to 7; Sat 9 to 6. Historical tours available on Saturdays, from 1-2 pm; 5 euros, per person. Once a week, there's perfume seminar where you can create your own:

Website: <http://www.glockengasse.de/en/>

RHINE CRUISES: these are a great way to visit Cologne since many of the city's main attractions, including eau de cologne sights, are a short walk from the river banks. Many veteran cruise lines offer Rhine cruises, such as Uniworld. (<http://www.uniworld.com/> or 800-733-7820.) Occasionally, Uniworld features a 3.5-hour guided shore excursion to Farina House, "the world's longest operating perfumery." For more Rhine cruises go to www.europeanrivercruises.com/?nr=mm1r

FOR MORE ON COLOGNE: <http://www.cologne-tourism.com/welcome.html>