

Preston Gralla
from *Victor Ponzini and the Flavor of Air*

Ponzini's fellow diners looked at him with a kind of awe. What brilliance! Of course – who but the great Ponzini himself could come up with a scheme that could take what is abundantly available for free throughout the world, infuse it with a bit of added value, and then profit from it? They were, they knew, in the presence of a master.

“I still had to find a way to manufacture and market flavored air, though. And I knew exactly where to turn. I have donated heavily, through the years, to Cornell University, and I knew that the Cornell Institute of Food Science has some of the foremost food researchers in the world. So I flew the next day by private jet to Ithaca, to see if the institute could help.

“I was greeted by the head of the institute, Dr. Vito Menjar, who set a table for us in his private dining room. There was Caprese salad made with local heirloom Brandywine tomatoes, very good extra virgin olive oil, and Buffalo Mozzarella. It was accompanied by a surprisingly good dry Riesling, from the Dr. Konstantine Frank winery situated on nearby Lake Keuka.

“As soon as I entered the room, Dr. Menjar rushed over and shook my hand. ‘Mr. Ponzini,’ he said, ‘I have been told about your plan – it is brilliant, absolutely brilliant.’ What else would he say, of course? I’ve donated millions to the university, and it’s his job to keep donors happy.

“My attention was distracted by an odd-looking man seated at the table, turned sideways. He was in his mid-forties, with a full, black beard, and equally thick black eyebrows, a barrel chest, and thick arms. There was something vaguely Germanic about

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him, and something about the strength of his upper body that made him look like one of those old-fashioned strongmen in a daguerreotype from the late nineteenth century; one expected to see his thick chest and biceps bulging out of a sleeveless striped unitard, hoisting above his head an old-fashioned barbell. But from the waist down was a very different story. Two very short legs dangled from his chair and didn't reach the floor. He paid no attention to me, and instead sniffed interrogatively first at the tomatoes, then the cheese on his plate, and then at the wine. He ignored me and kept sniffing, moving his nose closer and closer first to the food, then the wine.

“‘Mr. Ponzini,’ Doctor Menjar said, ‘I would like to introduce you to Professor Otto Hauch. He is one of the world’s foremost researchers in taste and smell perception, flavor chemistry, sensory evaluation methods, and sensory-instrumental correlations, all of which are relevant to what you are looking to accomplish.’

“I approached Hauch and held out my hand. It was an awkward moment because he was still seated and continued to sniff at the food and drink in front of him, without looking up. I thrust my hand down to his level – in fact, practically onto the plate itself, so that he would see it – and I’ll be damned if he didn’t sniff my hand! Then he put his two big hands on the table, pushed himself up from a seated position, and balancing himself with one hand on the table, held out the other to me, and practically crushed my hand when I held it out to him.

“‘A strong smell, but not a very strong grip,’ he said, before sitting back down. Then he pulled a small, much-worn black notebook out of his suit jacket front pocket, made a few notations in it, replaced it, and studied my face closely for a minute before speaking.

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“I understand from Doctor Menjar that you are looking to set up a business to sell *flavored air*,” he said, with a decided disbelieving and derisive emphasis on the last two words. ‘Do I understand him right?’

“I know that it sounds odd, but...” I began, but he cut me off before I could finish.

“You’re not the first to try it, you know,” he said. ‘A few years ago, a fashion company tried something similar. Unfortunately, though, they spent far more on the packaging than they did on the air itself. And they weren’t selling flavors. Instead, they claimed to sell air from exotic places around the world – the top of Mount Fiji, the Sahara Desert, Antarctica, that sort of thing. I am happy to report that it went completely bust. Phhhht!’

“I take it that you don’t think there’s much merit to the idea, then?”

“Merit in the idea?” he asked. ‘There’s plenty of merit in the *idea*. But not if you plan to sell it as some kind of *fashion accessory*, like a monogrammed necklace. Not if all you do is go to the top of a mountain somewhere – or *claim* you go to the top of a mountain somewhere – and gather air through a thoroughly unscientific method, cram it into a bottle through some poorly designed and inefficient manufacturing process, and then spend millions of dollars to design and market a bottle, and not a penny on making sure that the air in it doesn’t come out smelling like it originated in an oil refinery off Exit 13 of the New Jersey Turnpike!’

“I looked at Hauch with great affection. I had found a disillusioned idealist, one who had already dreamed of flavored air, and was bitter because others had tried a cheap, bastardized version of it and failed. I knew, then, that I had found my man: Disillusioned idealists make the best business partners. They’re as hard-headed as they come.

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“‘How about if it were done right?’ I asked. ‘What if we could bottle the essence of taste? If it were captured and manufactured properly, and we did it with real flavors, natural air flavored only with the purest of ingredients?’

“Professor Hauch suddenly grabbed my hand, twisted it so it was palm side up, then pressed his nose close to its surface, hovering an inch away. He took a deep sniff, then another and closed his eyes. After that he released me.

“‘It can be done,’ he said.”