

Arabian An Essence

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THERE are some things that add zest to life. Perfumes are one of them. They are associated with sophistication, culture and wellbeing. Perfumes have been around since at least the dawn of civilization.

The reasons why people wear perfumes are many and vary from person to person. Prime among them is attracting attention and having a feel-good effect. Man's gradual loss of the sense of detecting pheromones from the opposite sex over the millennia probably contributed to the evolution of perfumes. Today perfumes do what pheromones did for our ancestors. The choice of perfumes reflects the personality of the wearer.

Umpteen books have been written on the beneficial effects of perfumes on the body and mind. Medical research has established that the odors we smell have a significant impact on the way we feel. "We know from brain wave frequency studies that smelling lavender increases alpha waves in the back of the head, and they are associated with relaxation," says neurologist Dr. Alan Hirsch. "An odor such as jasmine increases beta waves in the front of the head, which are associated with a more alert state."

Perfumes are both oil-based and synthetic and are applied to the body or heated in a clay pot that diffuses the aroma throughout the room. The earliest use of perfumes has been recorded in a cuneiform tablet from the 2nd millennium BC in Mesopotamia. A chemist by the name of Tapputi is mentioned in the tablet.

"Ancient Egypt was a very fragrant civilization," says aromatic consultant John Steel. "They infused fragrant oils for massage, bathing and medicine, burned incense in religious ceremonies and used aromatic cedar oil to embalm their dead."

But Abu Yusuf Yaqub bin Ishaq Al-Kindi, the 9th Century Abbasid philosopher and scientist, is considered the founder of the perfume industry. He carried out extensive research and experiments in combining extracts from various aromatic plants and herbs to come out with a variety of products. He prepared a vast number of "recipes" for a wide range of perfumes.

Not surprisingly, the Middle East is regarded as the cradle of the perfume industry. The Crusaders took the knowledge of oriental medicine and perfumery to Europe in the 12th century. Alcohol-based synthetic perfumes, a comparatively recent innovation, today constitute the bulk of the \$40 billion global perfume industry.

In the Middle East today, Ajmal Perfumes is synonymous with captivating perfumes, beauty products and high-quality Arabic fragrances for the body and home. It all began when Ajmal Ali, a rice farmer from the Indian state of Assam, came to Bombay to try his luck as a trader in perfumes. With the rice crop frequently failing owing to the vagaries of monsoon rains, life was tough in Assam. The abundance of agarwood or oudh in his native Assam gave young Ajmal Ali the idea that he could perhaps make a living out of trading in this natural resource, the prime ingredient of all oriental perfumes. With 500 rupees and some oudh oil as his starting capital, he left his hometown for Bombay with high hopes and aspirations.

In the tradition of great masters, Ajmal Ali worked in a dingy house in Bombay in the early 1950s blending perfumes and trying to find the right mixture that would impress the many Arab traders who





Perfumes: The Art of Tradition

visited India's western shores and were fascinated by the country and its aromatic herbs. Half a century later, his son, Nazir Ajmal, today presides over the Dubai-based company which has an annual turnover of \$167 million and is a regional corporate entity with a vast portfolio of over 100 of the finest and most captivating fragrances.

Since shifting its operations base from Bombay to Dubai in 1976, Ajmal Perfumes has established over 100 exclusive retail outlets across the Arabian Gulf and hundreds of dealerships across the globe. The company has invested over \$10 million in a new 150,000 square-foot facility in Dubai that offers a high-tech automated production unit including a state-of-the-art research wing. Ajmal Perfumes is also the only regional perfume manufacturer authorized to issue quality certificates on behalf of the Saudi Arabian Standards Organization, or SASO.

Currently the company exports its products to 14 countries and has plans to increase the number to 20 by the end of this year. Chief Operations Officer Nazir Ajmal says the company creates fragrances in both sprays and oils and that they fall broadly into two categories — oriental and French or Western. Oriental fragrances tend to be highly concentrated and are usually five times stronger than the Western ones. But, explains Ajmal, oriental perfumery is constricted by the use of a limited number of ingredients whereas perfumers can work with many more ingredients in Western perfumery and, as such, be more creative and produce a diverse range of products.

The key ingredient of Ajmal's products, of course, is oudh and this is not always readily available as it

is found only in Southeast Asia and India's Assam state. Oudh oil is the product of infected species of *Aquilaria* and *Gyrinops* trees. The trees frequently become infected with a parasite fungus or mold, *Phialophora parasitica*, and begin to produce an aromatic resin in response to this attack. The results are achieved by allowing plenty of time for the infection to fester. Eventually the tree dies and agarwood or oudh resin is chipped away in various grades of quality and sold.

How do you classify fragrances into those for use by men and women? Typically, fragrances for women tend to be stronger, says Ajmal. Floral notes are also associated with feminine scents. Men's fragrances, on the other hand, are spicy and woody. Usage patterns have, however, blurred the lines lately and today a majority of fragrances are unisex.

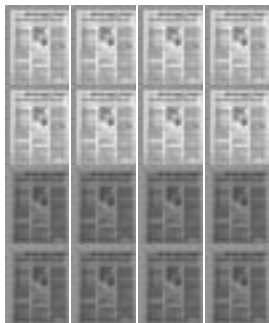
To remain in business, perfume manufacturers have to be constantly innovative. In the case of Ajmal Perfumes, its marketing teams do considerable research on consumer taste and behavior and report that to Nazir Ajmal, who is also the chief perfumer. Based on the input, Ajmal then comes out with different blends. But ultimately, Ajmal admits, it is the market that decides the fate of a particular brand. In "ideal conditions" a typical fragrance should last for a year. Oils can be used for longer — up to five years if stored in glass containers.

Marketing perfumes is an art in itself. Aesthetics plays a big role in determining the shape of bottles and their color. New ideas and technological advancement in bottle designing help in choosing the final design.

In this part of the world, demand for fragrances soars during the months of Shabaan and Ramadan. But like music and art there will always be, wherever humans are, demand for perfumes from both connoisseurs and amateurs.



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