

The scent of Arabia

There is a place where fragrances are almost sacred. Where men and women share essences of fruity and flowery scents and where perfume bottles look like sparkling jewels and ornaments. This place is Arabia. Meanwhile, Perfume oil (attar) is used throughout Arabic culture. Rose petals are used in the making of prayer beads so that when they are rubbed they release a pleasant aroma. Throughout the creation of a perfume, it is tested frequently, and under varying conditions. "We have to constantly find out if it is the same in the early morning as it is in the evening. Is the scent altered by weather conditions? These and many other checks are made before the perfume is considered a finished product," says Nazir Ajmal, chief operations officer of Dubai-based Ajmal Perfumes, which has been making perfumes in the emirate of Dubai since 1951.

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The scent of Arabia...

Middle Eastern culture is renowned for its unique customs, dress and even its own perfumes. Instantly recognisable the world over, **Raziqueh Hussain** gets a whiff of the history of the region

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In existence for more than 5,000 years, Arabian perfumery has not lost its allure. Even today, there are fascinating and exotic scents which are seeped in local traditions.

Jannet Al Firdaus, Afshaan, Tagreed, Dhan al Oudh... these are not tales from *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*, but rather the names of Arabian perfumes.

There are essentially two types of perfume: *oud* and *bukhoor*. *Oud* is basically wood that has a certain smell to it. In its purest form, it is used as a kind of perfume for both men and women. *Bukhoor* is a mixture of scents and usually looks like round pieces of coal about the size of your thumb. This scent is burned in homes and is also used in some of the UAE's shopping malls, often enticing curious tourists into stores.

The earliest use of perfumes has been recorded on a Cuneiform tablet — in the second millennium BC in Mesopotamia. A chemist by the name of Tapputi is mentioned in the tablet.

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

Focus



SCENTS OF ARABIA: (Left) Factory staff arrange perfume bottles at the Ajmal Perfume factory in Al Quoz. (Right) Bottles being filled with liquid perfume (Below) Each bottle being packed into cardboard boxes before being send to stores

extensive research and experiments in combining extracts from various aromatic plants and herbs to come up with a variety of products. He prepared a vast number of 'recipes' to create a wide range of perfumes.

Even in today's economically tense times, the international perfume market is doing very well. The overall valuation of the market will be around US\$33 billion by the year 2012. The Arabian Peninsula is currently responsible for around US\$270 million of this, and the rate of growth in this region is much higher than other countries. Last year, for example, total sales went up by around 15 percent.

Fragrances know no boundaries. Typically, perfumes for women tend to be stronger, says Salim Kalsekar, managing director, Al Rasasi Perfumes Limited.

Floral notes are also associated with feminine scents. Men's fragrances, on the other hand, are spicy and woody. Usage trends have, however, blurred the lines lately and today a majority of fragrances are unisex.

The product line can broadly be classified as Oriental and Occidental (ingredients are European, especially French) fragrances, each stream has a particular tonality to reflect customer needs based on gender. It would be important to



note that though certain parameters for gender-based classifications do exist today, the difference is thinning with more women opting for male fragrances.

To remain in business, perfume manufacturers have to be constantly innovative. In the case of J&B Perfumes Limited, its marketing teams do considerable research on consumer taste and behaviour and report those to Syed Masood Alam, the general manager who is also the chief perfumer. Based on that input, they come up with dif-

ferent blends. But ultimately, Alam 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 longer — up to five years if stored in glass containers.

Perfumes are known by 'notes'. The top note is the one which is sensed immediately on application, and the middle note is what remains when the top note evaporates. On the disappearance of the middle note, what lingers is the base note, which, along with the middle note, represents the core aroma of the perfume.

A typical fragrance takes anywhere from 18 months to two years, from concept to finished product.

"Just as a painter spreads paint over a canvas and then steps back to view it critically, checking up on whether more light is needed in an area, the perfumer tests his creations as comprehensively," says Nabeel Adam Ali, managing director of Swiss Arabian Perfumes, founded in 1974. "Perhaps adding a minute quantity of jasmine to give smoothness, or a slightly heavier note to add more character to an otherwise light scent is what the perfumer may finally decide on."

The most mystical and aromatic resin in the world, known as Frankincense, is the key ingredient in making a distinctive Arabic



BOTTLED UP: Perfumes at the Swiss Arabian Perfume factory at Sharjah Free Zone

fragrance. It grows on small trees and shrubs found in countries like Oman in the Middle East, and Somalia in Northern Africa.

In ancient Arabia, Frankincense was one of the most valuable commodities and worth more than its weight in gold. On 'The Frankincense Route,' Arab merchants with 400 camel caravans crossed barren sands, navigated by stars, and followed a route between secret water cisterns hidden from roaming thieves.

It was used since ancient times to awaken higher consciousness and to enhance spirituality, meditation, prayer and mental perception. "Frankincense slows and deepens breathing, reduces tension and helps to calm and comfort oneself while lifting one's spirits, so it's a capital ingredient in Arabian scents," says Adam Ali.

The Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) has encouraged the use of good fragrances.

Perfume oil (*attar*) is used throughout Arabic culture. Rose water is used as food flavourings for Turkish Delight, the purifying of mosques and the sprinkling on guests from a flask called a *gulabdan*.

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New ideas and technological ad-

Marketing perfumes is an art. Aesthetics plays a big role in determining the shape and colour of the bottle. New ideas and techniques help in design

vancement in bottle design help in choosing the final product.

The bottles for Arabian perfumes are often sturdy and imposing, in shades of amber and gold. With their generous, eye-pleasing shapes, golden arabesques and other adornments, they call to mind the shapes of certain monuments (domes and more), decorative elements and jewellery.

While fragrance bottles from Arabia may well surprise western consumers, the fragrances themselves are quite unique.

"A perfume should be harmonious, rounded-off, but never boring. It should be reminiscent of natural and familiar scents, but also bring new and surprising ones.

"It should be a mirror of contemporary aesthetic feeling, not simply reflect some passing fashion," says Adam Ali.

You can't ignore the common scents that exist in the UAE, whether you get a brief scent when someone walks past, or when you wander past certain stores in the nation's malls.

It could be that these scents have wafted straight out of the pages of a tale from *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*.

Exotic, mysterious and alluring — pure Arabia.

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