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## The Sweet Smell of Success

In five short decades, Ajmal has become synonymous for creating high-quality perfumes. Now the Dubai-based company is going global, reports Vhairi Walker.

**AJMAL IS IN THE BUSINESS OF** gold - liquid gold. In the most expensive room of their Dubai-based perfume factory, there's no machinery. Rather, there are containers of varying sizes lining the shelves, each one filled with a potently dark and treacly mixture called oudh.

"The inventory here is worth more than the manufacture of this building, which cost \$10 million," explains Abdulla Ajmal, the company's assistant general manager and a third-generation family member. "Every gramme is accounted for; it's very similar to the gold and diamond business. This room is like Fort Knox."

Oudh is a treasured commodity and a key component in Oriental perfume. It is created as a result of a fungus attacking a type of agarwood tree, taking around 25

to 30 years to cultivate prior to extraction. Through devoted research, Ajmal have managed to reduce the initial period of inoculation to around 10 years, a development that has not only helped them significantly speed up the process, but one that they have patented in six of the world's top oudh producing countries.

Ajmal has also gone some way towards invigorating depleting stocks through the introduction of afforestation programmes, which they launched back in 1976. Such forward thinking has strengthened the company's position in the market where, in some arenas, they are competing head-on with international brands.

The family business has grown significantly since its inauguration in India

by farmer, Ajmal Ali, more than 50 years ago. The first UAE outlet was opened in 1976 and today the company has a total of 110 stores across GCC, with a further 500 dealerships and stockists spanning the Middle East.

But their ambitions don't end there. With plans to roll out a further 100 stores in the next three to five years, and expansion into Europe and eventually America likely, the company has set its eyes on pursuing the travel retail market.

Ajmal demonstrated just how serious their expansion aspirations were when, in 2004, the group invested in a new 14,000-square-metre manufacturing plant that includes a high-tech, automated production unit and research wing in Dubai's industrial area of Al Quoz.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ANOOS BAKR

Ajmal is the largest perfume manufacturer in the United Arab Emirates, selling Oriental perfumes, oils, contemporary ranges of perfume, bath products and incense.

"We consider ourselves to be 'ethnic chic', a fusion of West and East," Abdulla says.

While all the fragrances are conceived, created, developed and manufactured in-house, Ajmal sources its raw materials from around the world, in addition to creating its own.

"The edge is innovation," continues Abdulla. "The only way to stay ahead in this industry is through a tremendous amount of research. If you can discover or even create a raw material, which we call 'captive' ingredients, that gives you an added edge."

**EACH PRODUCT** takes time and effort – up to 18 months-plus, from conceptualisation to seeing the perfume on the shelves. After an idea for a new perfume materialises, trials and tests are conducted in the research and development wing. A consumer panel tests the perfume before the chief perfumer ensures that the quality of the blend conforms to internationally and regionally recognised bodies.

The perfumes are blended and the macerating process takes place in the main production area, where huge metal containers store the concentrates or ingredients for weeks at a time. If the perfume is to be a spray version, the concentrate is blended with water and alcohol and requires a further four weeks of macerating. To rid the product of sedimentation and a cloudy appearance, it is then chilled to separate the solids from the liquids before being filtered, stored in tanks and then piped into the second shed to be poured into bottles and packaged.

Quality control is a significant element of the production process. Ajmal's perfumes are tested to determine whether they can withstand the heat en route to Saudi Arabia, one of their biggest markets. The



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product is therefore taken to 60 degrees Celsius to gauge how the components and perfume will react to such extremes.

Batches of perfume are checked and re-checked. Cotton swabs soaked in the new perfume are also kept on potential packaging materials to see whether peeling and discolouration occurs. As Ajmal has stringent quality controls, multi-trials are conducted on suppliers' materials and components discarded if they show signs of alteration.

The bottles themselves are highly refined. Crafted by designers and engineers, some of the pieces have more than 12 components. Others are made from crystal and 24-carat gold – a glittering treasure in themselves.

Similarly, the boxes are equally sophisticated in their craftsmanship and beautiful in their design. In the past, Ajmal has created limited-edition sets. One set used the most expensive ingredients and luxurious materials available. Only five were made and each sold for Dh\$150,000 (\$40,800). Despite such detail in the packaging, Abdulla insists that the "true diamond" is what goes inside the bottle.

Facing Cartier, the perfumery's Ajmal Eternal retail outlet is at ease with the exclusivity of other brand name stores at Dubai's Emirates Tower shopping complex. The store was launched in 2001 with an ethos to provide 'exclusive perfumes rich in the region's heritage, together with works of art signifying various means of expression'.

Explaining the realignment, Abdulla says: "We wanted to do something different, something a little more exclusive and something that would complement our business. The challenge was trying to differentiate one's self from your own brand and come up with a more exclusive label within your stable."

Fostering the belief that perfume is an intricate art form in itself gave way to the concept of Ajmal Eternal. The idea of incorporating glass seemed a natural progression, given that their fragrances are

encapsulated in it. And an opportunity soon revealed itself when Ajmal discovered that Murano, the famous Venetian glass, had never been represented in the UAE before. This was to prove an ingenious move.

The store itself blends centuries-old Arabic charm with modern chic. Ambient lighting, gleaming marble floors, Arabic-style arches and rich mahogany furniture were chosen carefully to retain Ajmal's Arabic identity, while also appealing to the global consumer. And it worked.

It is impossible to typify the Ajmal Eternal customer as it includes several nationalities. Such diverse popularity bodes well for the company as it plans to capture a bigger share of the global market within the next few years. As does the company's association with Murano glass.

The elaborate and skilfully made glass is world renowned and hugely sought after, assuming a timeless yet contemporary quality. Masterpiece sculptures, jewellery boxes, vases and ashtrays are among the extensive range of glasswork for sale, which sell from Dhs750 (\$200) and peak around the Dhs300,000 (\$80,000) mark.

**AJMAL ETERNAL** also stocks its own perfumes, oils and incense – the absolute premium of its products. This means the majority of the packaging consists of crystal, while only the highest grade of oil is sold.

"The most important thing is the quality of the oil itself," says Abdulla. "The difference is in the composition. When you repeat natural oil that has a lot more naturals, you will never guarantee the next batch from the earlier – it might be different. If you think of it in terms of an orange, one orange doesn't always taste the same as another. Every time is a new experience and our clientele understands that."

Unassuming in their appearance, the incense chips used to fragrance homes are also of superior standard, graduating in price from Dhs10,000 (\$2,700) to

Dhs100,000 (\$27,000) per kilogramme. To get a consistent fragrance when burning, Ajmal pressurises the oil within the wood before drying it over a period of four months.

Their cost is subject to the quality, which varies from country to country and region to region, and by the amount of oil the chips produce.

As well as stocking a wide range of their essential oils, Oriental and Western perfumes, Ajmal offers the customer an opportunity to create a customised fragrance at the counter of the company's flagship store, My Inspiration, in the Mall of the Emirates.

"The idea behind My Inspiration was first of all to develop a new concept and secondly, to bring the making of perfumery to the people. Our 'inspiration' came from our consumers, who are so individualistic," says Abdulla.

I was instantly thrown when Abdulla, pen poised, asked me what I intended to call my fragrant concoction. It appears most aspiring perfumers choose their own name, so for want of something more original, I succumbed to my inner narcissist and named my perfume after myself too. The second question of 'oil or spray' I found much easier, quickly opting for the latter.

The ingredients found in perfume are represented by various fragrant classifications, among them floral, fruity, woody, musky and citrus. The different constituents are combined to create the three notes of perfume: top, heart and base.



Multi-trials are carried out on potential packaging and components in the Ajmal factory.

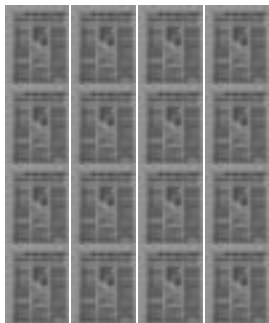
An in-store chart illustrates the ingredients and their respected intensities, which helps a novice such as myself put a perspective on perfume making. At the top sits the potent jasmine, with the more mellow musk at the opposite extreme. But what musk lacks in punch, it makes up in milligrammes as it is commonly used in the greatest amount.

"Musk in perfumery is extremely critical for two reasons – it softens the edges, with a velvety feel to it; and secondly and most importantly, it's always the foundation for any kind of perfume because it lasts longer on your skin. Musk binds all the ingredients together and keeps it going for hours, after all the top and heart notes are gone," says Abdulla.

Presented with three scents – the first fresh and musky; the second more Oriental with a hint of oudh; and the third a woody 'bohemian' number – I opt for the first, an exotic sounding 'Fantasia', followed by a woody cologne, which is often used as a dilutant for spray perfumes.

Shaking the bottle with the vigour of a cocktail maker, Abdulla then sprays a bit on my wrist. I must say that 'Vhairi' smelled rather good, but in that respect I have a feeling I am not entirely unique. Ajmal is, after all, in the business of making people smell good. ■

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