Making scents

In most factories, the first assault on one's sensory perceptions is noise. The loud sounds of one piece of metal machinery grinding against another mix with the humming of engines and the screeching of wheels on a forklift, or some variation on this theme. Not so within the large, grey walls of the Ajmal production complex. Given the product, it is not surprising that the olfactory senses are the first to be tweaked. A perfumery, each room in the Ajmal factory has a slightly different scent, some more appealing than others. The family business began 56 years ago in India and now makes over 300 perfumes, sold throughout the world. The commercial success has allowed Ajmal to create what is among the most modern research and development labs and production centres in the Middle East.

There are 1 clipping(s) in 1 part(s) with summary available in: English

Published on:	12/7/2009	Name:	The National
Section:	The Na-atrs&life	Country:	United Arab Emirates
Edition:	235	Language:	English
Page:	5	Circulation:	90,000
Size:	287 cc	Distribution:	AE
Ad Value:	$13,876.50	Frequency:	Morning

Workers repack some of the 300 perfumes that are created at the Dubai-based Ajmal perfumes plant. The perfumes are sold across the world. Paulo Vecina / The National

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Nazir Ajmal, the Nose of his perfumery, will sniff rubbish to clear his heightened sense of smell, Jessica Hume finds

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Rooms filled with glass beakers, tubes and metal distillation machines line one of the main halls in the factory. One room sits empty, save for a chromatography machine, where every ingredient in any given substance can be determined and separated out.

And around noon on this particular day, thousands of thin, rectangular glass bottles shift down the conveyor belt in the main room, where they are sterilised, filled with green-coloured perfume and fitted with a spray pump before being sent to another area in the high-ceilinged room where they will be inspected for quality, packaged and shipped.

This particular fragrance is among Ajmal's most popular. Called Chemystery, its sweet yet masculine aroma fills the main floor of this huge room. Up a flight of metal stairs, men in blue coveralls sit at a long table, manually fitting together the more expensive scents – the oils.

Contained in crystal bottles, these highly concentrated perfumes sell for incredible amounts of money. Ajmal's most expensive perfume, an oil, is called Dahn Al Moattaq, and sells for Dh3,200 for 14ml. Its curved bottle has a distinctly Arabic design. Royalty, I am told, are the main customers for this one.

Nazir Ajmal, the Nose of the Dubai-based company, can smell fear. In fact, the 43-year-old goes so far as to say he could also create the smell of a fear and put it in a bottle if he were ever asked to do so – not that anyone's made that request.

His job involves creating new fragrances for the company as well as developing custom perfumes for his private clients.

Anyone can be a Nose, he explains, but some people, himself included, have a heightened sense of smell naturally. And still, this must be developed over time; he has trained his nose. And his brain: there are neurotransmitters which need developing in order to pick up enough minute differences in scents to become a master. His nose, however, is not insured. ("They don't have that kind of insurance here anyway.")

In addition to his finely tuned sense of smell, Ajmal has a library with over 1,200 raw materials to choose from, and has access to an additional 50,000.

Inspiration also plays an important role in perfume creation. And this, he explains, can come from anywhere. "Sometimes I'm inspired by a nice face and nice clothes."

Naturally, Ajmal has an encyclopaedic knowledge of perfumes, scents and their origins. Perfume creation is a science as much as it is an art, and Ajmal is well versed in both.

In a weak attempt to test his abilities, I throw a few key words out and ask how easy it would be to create this fragrance. Blue, ocean, fresh. Too simple?

"Easy," Ajmal says, putting the earbuds of his cell phone into his ear and dialling a number. "Yes, get me cologne, 10 per cent."

A few minutes later a man comes in holding two thin pieces of paper that have been dipped in a liquid.

"There is something that smells exactly like the ocean, but without the bad parts. This is it," he says, taking one piece of paper and passing the other to me. It does indeed smell like the ocean – but without the dead fish and pollution. "So I would use this and then I would ask you some other questions, like what kind of flowers do you like? I would want an idea of what kind of floral notes to put in."

Not all the requests he gets are this straightforward.

"A man comes in and says he wants a scent that will make the girls follow him around," Ajmal says, laughing. "I had to tell the guy that I'm not a magician. Girls follow an aura, not a scent. I can only enhance the aura."

Another private client wanted a scent so intriguing that when he would get up from a chair and leave the room, people would ask who it was who had just sat there.

"For this guy, I made him something of course, but I also had to tell him how to wear perfume," Ajmal explains. "The raw material of the perfume has to make contact with the leather of the chair. Arab girls know this. They put their clothes out on their beds and spray the perfume on them like that. If you just put it on your skin, it will go much quicker."

Arab people want to leave a trail, Ajmal says, especially women. Fragrance is part of identity, he explains. Rejecting the idea that scents have more cultural significance in the East than the West, Ajmal says other than taste in fragrance, the major difference is that the perfume industry in the West is more advanced.

"Perfume started in the Middle East and then went out to the world." While the West improved on frangrances, he said, the East didn't.

Eastern perfumers have raw materials available to them all year round; in the absence of the cold winters of the West, the need to develop mechanisms for preservation never arose.

The West also figured out how to dissect certain parts of the raw materials, Ajmal explains. The jasmine flower, for example, has three elements – floral, oily and animal. Western perfumers were able to isolate those three elements and could then use only the desirable parts, animal not among them.

These advancements meant perfume creators in the West gained greater control of the fragrance, which allowed them to produce more variety.

"Western fragrances became lighter," he says. "We use thicker ones, more oil. Sometimes there is no alcohol in our perfumes at all. The aim is to be noticed. Because it is humid, the perfume will disappear quickly, so we use heavier materials."

Perfume design in the West and East both follow similar patterns, Ajmal explains, but if the West prefers ABC, the East prefers XYZ; the same, but different.

He takes a piece of paper and draws two shapes; a triangle on one side, a square with inward leaning angles in the top two corners on the other. The triangle describes the concept for western perfumes. Ajmal draws two lines through it, explaining the ratio between top notes, middle and base notes. "The top notes here are sharp; they go away quickly. Western perfumes are inspired by the middle and base notes."

He points his pen to the other shape. "The top here has less volume. The perfume is formed by the bottom notes, the body. Typical ingredients in the East would be balsams, gums, resins. We like more spicy fragrances. These are more stable. The West uses some of these elements too, but only a touch, and just for stability."

Ajmal loves his job. Although he comes home every night smelling of women's perfumes his wife doesn't get jealous, he says. Sitting in a large chair, ashing his long cigarette into a heavy orange glass ashtray, Ajmal says his sense of smell is impervious to activities – smoking included – which are known to diminish the olfactory senses.

Sometimes, between smelling sessions, he admits he walks outside to the rubbish bin. To smell something bad can clear the nose, readying it for the next olfactory onslaught.

He can have five or six perfumes around him at once and differentiate between each, easily. In fact, he even wears a fragrance to work every day. "Oh, no one wears perfume like me. I wear a lot. And I still smell other ones all day."

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Nazir Ajmal says that inspiration plays an important role in perfume creation, and inspiration can come from anywhere. Paulo Vecina / The National

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Nazir Ajmal the Nose of Ajmal perfumes

Circulation and ad data supplied by:

MediaSource

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