



At M.L. Ramnarain Perfumers in Kannauj, India, freshly picked roses are used to make heady botanical scents called attar.

A PERFUMED HISTORY

IN A QUEST FOR 'LIQUID GOLD,' GENERATIONS OF CRAFTSPEOPLE
IN INDIA HAVE BECOME AROMA ALCHEMISTS.

BY RACHNA SACHASINH

LONG BEFORE SUNRISE Tegh Singh arrives at his flower farm on the banks of the Ganges. He circles the rose shrubs, plucks blossoms at peak bouquet, and tosses the pink petals into a jute sack slung over his shoulder. By the time the first rays of sunlight skim across the river, 35-year-old Singh is on his motorcycle, ferrying his harvest to the small city of Kannauj, known as the perfume capital of India.

For more than 400 years, and through time-tested distillation methods, Kannauj has been crafting oil-based botanical perfumes called attar. Sought after by Mughal royals—as well as everyday folk—in ancient India's fragrance-obsessed culture,

attar has recently awakened a new generation to the allure of its sensual scents.

Unlike modern perfumes, which have alcohol as a carrier—because it's inexpensive, neutral, and easily diffused—attars traditionally use sandalwood oil, making them unctuous and highly absorptive. The scent of a droplet lingers pleasantly on the skin, sometimes for days. Equally enchanting to men and women, attars strike intense floral, woody, musky, smoky, or grassy notes. Attars for cold seasons can be warming, with scents of clove, cardamom, and saffron. In warmer seasons, attars can bring cooling fragrances of jasmine, vetiver, and marigold.

Kannauj produces these, as well as the enigmatic *mitti* attar, which evokes the scent of earth after a rainfall thanks to baked alluvial clay in the distillation. *Shamama*, another coveted invention, is a distilled blend of 40 or more flowers, herbs, and resins that takes days to make and months to age. Some perfume houses in Europe use these attars—rose, vetiver, jasmine, and others—as a layer, a compelling chord in the composition of modern perfumery.

In the narrow lanes of Bara Bazaar, the city's main market, shops are crammed with glass bottles holding attar and *ruh*, or essential oil, each smelling better than the last. Men sit cross-legged on cushioned floor mats, sniffing vials and dabbing extraordinarily long perfumed cotton swabs behind their ears. Presiding over this age-old commerce is the attar *sazh*, or perfumer, conjuring and enticing with the aura of an imperial alchemist.

"The world's best perfumers have walked through these narrow lanes, making their way through mud and cow dung to get their hands on Kannauj attar. There is really nothing like it," says Pranjal Kapoor, the fifth-generation partner at M.L. Ramnarain Perfumers, one of the traditional distillers still operating here.

Tegh Singh arrives and unloads his blossoms in Kapoor's godown, an open-air courtyard that serves as the distillery. Ram Singh, Kapoor's master attar craftsman, scoops the petals into a copper still and tops it with water. Before fastening the lid, Ram Singh packs the rim with a clay-and-cotton mash, which hardens and creates a formidable seal. When the flowery concoction begins to simmer, steam travels from the still, via a bamboo reed, into a copper pot holding sandalwood oil, which readily imbibes the rose-saturated vapor.

During the five to six hours it takes for Tegh Singh's roses to become attar, Ram Singh moves between the still and the pot, testing the water temperature and listening to the hiss of steam to intuit whether to feed more wood into the fire. "I've been doing this since I was a boy," says the 50-year-old Ram Singh.

To achieve the desired potency, the process is repeated the next day, with a new batch of rose petals. Once this is done, the rose attar is aged for several months in a camel-skin bottle, which wicks moisture. The finished rose attar is akin to liquid gold. One kilo (2.2 pounds) can fetch up to \$3,000.

Today most Kannauj attar ends up in the Middle



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East and among regional Muslim communities in India. In Old Delhi's Chandni Chowk market, built in the 17th century by Mughal emperor Shah Jahan, Gulab Singh Johrimal is a longtime institution that now carries both attar and modern fragrances. It's almost always full of Muslim men in search of attar to scent themselves before Friday prayers and festivals such as Eid. But local markets aren't enough to sustain Kannauj's distilleries, and many have had to close or shift to making facsimiles of Western perfumes.

Nonetheless, Kapoor is optimistic. He spends much of his time courting top international perfume houses, touting the traditions of attar and the terroir of Kannauj botanicals. "Western tastes are shifting east," he says. "Typically, [the West] prefers light, citrusy notes, but these days you see the big daddies like Dior, Hermès, and of course, the Middle Eastern perfume houses going for gilded scents like rose and shamama."

Perhaps attar's most prominent global ambassador is Jahnvi Lakhota Nandan, born in the scent-loving city of Lucknow, who trained as a master perfumer in Europe for seven years before opening The Perfume Library in Goa and Paris. Nandan's distillations are equal parts poetry, eccentricity, and science. Each year she creates one, perhaps two, new scents, and attar is an important part of her repertoire.

"Attar speaks to the soul. All the fire and smoke in a small space can seem apocalyptic, but it's also authentic and beautiful," she says. "You cannot re-create this in a lab in Europe." □

Based in Thailand and Laos, **Rachna Sachasinh** writes about culture and travel throughout Asia. Photographers **Tuul and Bruno Morandi** live in Paris and have roamed the globe for their projects.



In the Bottle

At a shop in Jaipur, crystal bottles show off high-quality attar from Kannauj. Built atop alluvial soil, near the Ganges River, Kannauj is well suited to cultivating fragrant plants, such as jasmine and rose, that are distilled into varieties of perfume.