

Profiles in perfumery

“I’m an Indie”

Mandy Aftel’s “do-it-yourself” philosophy and focus on natural perfumery have resulted in a successful, unconventional fragrance career

Vanity Fair magazine has called her the “Angel of Alchemy,” but what Mandy Aftel, founder of Aftelier Perfumes, does is more simply explained. She makes scents for solid and liquid perfumes, face and body care products, custom perfumes, and more. And she does it all her way — naturally. Aftel is also a noted author, including a cookbook, *Aroma*, which offers one fragrance recipe and three food recipes for each of nearly 30 ingredients discussed, such as green tea, vanilla and ginger. This is the perfume world’s answer to the Joy of Cooking. In addition, Aftel has been an advocate for perfume education, leading demonstrations and classes at the University of Southern California and the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, among other institutions.

Beginnings

Indeed, Aftel’s route to this rarified profession began with a different art form — writing. “I was going to write a novel about a turn-of-the-century perfumer,” she says, “and began collecting books on the subject.” Smelling scents, being surrounded by perfume books, and being exposed to the raw materials and essences inspired Aftel to steer from literature to perfumery. There was a certain attraction to the alchemical nature of the field, she says, especially the beakers, bottles and essences.

Hectic Pace

Unfortunately, the life of the independent perfumer isn’t all contemplative artistic creation. What with ingredient restocking, smelling samples (investigating quality and scent), answering phone calls and e-mails from customers and potential customers, and receiving visitors, Aftel finds she has little time for purely creative work. The workload means she often juggles several new custom perfume projects at a time. Still, Aftel finds the time to seek inspiration, including reading publications such as “The Snail Newsletter,” the official publication of Slow Food USA,

which stresses the importance of cultural cuisine, food plants, animals and farming, with a focus on good food and nutrition.

Finding Inspiration

Aftel’s imagination is often sparked by novel natural fragrance materials, which in turn sets her off on new projects. After experimenting with new ingredients, her final projects typically revolve around one or two main materials. For example, if she comes across a sample for a new, fantastic jasmine, she’ll focus her project around that. The resulting fragrances are usually named for the inspirational ingredients (see, for example, Aftel’s *Linden Blossom Essence* and *Cacao Perfume*).

Ingredient-Driven Creation

It comes as no surprise that Aftel’s work changes based on the needs of the individual customer. Varying factors include price of the ingredients and final product, the customer’s emotions, and other concerns. Though the creative process very much centers around customer needs, Aftel’s fragrance formulation remains ingredient-driven. “I take the time to educate my clients on ingredients — price, quality, and other important factors,” she says. Aftel says this approach is rare in the fragrance industry, particularly the devotion to pure natural ingredients. Paradoxically, this focus on such a narrow range of materials actually serves as the main drive of the creative process.

Because the parameters change with each particular brief, the working process is inevitably variable. When working on a candle scent, Aftel explains, “People come to my studio and smell the different top, middle and base notes, and I ask them what the scent has to do. Then I work based on their cost limit and the limit of what will burn in a candle.” This is the general guide to the specific parameters. “I work to create something with a strong enough identification to be a signature scent, but not overwhelming,” she says. This results in several iterations in the process. Aftel will often derive a perfume in addition to the candle. The two formulas must be similar, complimentary and fall within the price point set by the customer — considerations of both aesthetics and cost.

In another example of Aftel’s creative process, let’s imagine she is designing a male scent. The customer imagines a scent akin to tobacco, whiskey and leather. This project has no price criteria, meaning Aftel can explore far and wide before developing the final scent. She must think: “How would I do this for myself?” The result? “I make what I think is superior, as well as something closer to the client’s original description; I’ll present both and we’ll see what the reaction is.” In short, Aftel trusts her own unique vision while also addressing the more rigid parameters of the client’s original concept, providing a venue for creativity and commerce simultaneously.

Interest in Ingredients

Aftel reads the growth in her specialized sector of the perfumery market as a direct result of an increase in consumers’ food awareness, particularly healthy, natural and organic trends. People are more interested in perfume ingredients because they are more interested in food ingredients — what goes into/onto

their bodies. Certainly this is something all fragrance creators would do well to keep their eye on, especially young, up-and-coming perfumers such as those Aftel has helped train.

Aftel sees further parallels between the food (chef) and fragrance (perfumer) worlds. “Integrity of the ingredients and searching out the best quality in food is synonymous with what the perfumer has to do,” she says. This is especially so for a natural perfumer that has to be careful about variation from batch to batch.

One result of what Aftel sees as consumers’ growing desire for quality natural ingredients is a declining interest in strong, overpowering perfumes that can last all day. Consumers appear to be looking for more diffusive scents, fragrances that will fade after a time.

On Vanilla

“A good vanilla absolute wasn’t a fortune when I began,” says Aftel. “Now, a genuine absolute is one of the most expensive ingredients on the market.” Aftel purchases Madagascar absolute, but her beans are Tahitian. “Tahiti beans are very beautiful,” she says, “slightly floral, and are not dried out.” Why bother with the hassles of good natural vanilla? Aftel’s answer: “The exotic nature (of an ingredient, specifically Tahiti vanilla beans) affects the wearer.”

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