

OCTOBER 2011

IMAGE: UNCOMMON SCENTS

Beast in the Bottle

As perfume's seductive supporting player, oud is the not too sweet essence redolent of earth and sex

by DENISE HAMILTON



PHOTO: NOLA LOPEZ

Oud is perfumery's beguiling Scheherazade, spinning 1,001 aromatic tales of warmed skin and beastly languid pleasure. Also spelled *aoud* or *oudh* and known in some countries as agar, it dates to ancient times and was used to scent temples and homes. It was also touted for its aphrodisiac and medicinal properties.

A unisex note often paired with saffron, rose, woods and spice, oud can play a minor role in "gateway" versions like Micallef's Vanille Aoud or the pungent star of hard-core offerings like Kilian's Pure Oud.

A blend of a medicinal, almost rubbery, Band-Aid note and a strangely hypnotic, earthy, dark, leathery, animalic quality, oud can be an acquired taste, like single-malt scotch, truffles and Arvo Pärt symphonies. Precious and rare, it's a sticky resinous substance produced as a defense by Aquilaria trees in Southeast Asia against fungus. After being harvested from the wood in remote forests, it is distilled and brought to market in Bombay and Bangkok with high-stakes secrecy, skullduggery and adulteration that rivals the opium trade.

Today, surging demand endangers global supply. Attempts to "farm" oud by intentionally infecting Aquilaria trees with the fungus that triggers it has had mixed results. Like the exquisite (and now restricted) Mysore sandalwood prized by haute perfumeries, oud just may fall victim to its own popularity, unless resources are sustainably managed.

It takes 150 pounds of Aquilaria wood to produce 20 milliliters (a bit more than four teaspoons) of distilled oud, according to Trygve Harris, who owns Enfleurance, a Manhattan boutique specializing in essential oils. Stories circulate of a Middle Eastern sheik who paid \$62,000 for a kilo of oud. Harris charges up to \$120 for two milliliters. Little wonder then, that fragrance chemists recently developed a synthetic oud. Since perfume houses are known to be as cryptic as the Cumaean Sibyl about revealing ingredients, debate rages over which expensive niche scents contain real oud.

Whether natural or synthesized, what's beyond doubt is oud's ascendance. Anthony de la Cruz, who manages Barney's perfume counter in Beverly Hills, says sales of oud scents spiked 25 percent last year. Franco Wright, co-owner of Scent Bar and its online entity, Lucky Scent, calls oud "the new black."

Curious to sniff oud in its raw state, Wright procured some last year and asked L.A. indie perfumer Brent Leonesio of Smell Bent to formulate it for Lucky Scent's Untitled series. The result—Untitled No. 8—is popular with die-hard oud lovers. "The response was actually quite surprising," says Wright. "It is dirtier and more feral than [Nasomatto's] Black Afgano."

"Perfume people are always searching for dirty scents—and the more brutish the better," adds Leonesio. "Agar is unique in its mingling of animal, earth, wood and smoke notes; it's dark and complex by its nature. So I thought I'd gift-wrap a beast for them."

That beast has been slouching our way for some time. In the 1970s, purveyors of exotic perfumery

50 Johnnys
A name that's rock 'n' roll gold



CAN YOU RECALL 'EM ALL?

What patchouli or sandalwood scents were to backpacking

like Etro and L'Artisan helped Western customers discover Eastern notes and spices. What patchouli or sandalwood scents were to backpacking hippies back in the day, oud could become for 21st-century fragrance hounds.

The first Western perfume featuring prominent oud —Yves Saint Laurent's M7 in 2002—fopped resoundingly. But niche perfumery took note, and Pierre Montale, a Paris maker who lived in Saudi Arabia in the early aughts while creating fragrances for royal families, launched an eponymous line of Eastern ouds that found both critical and commercial success, despite prices of \$150 for a 50-milliliter bottle.

At Duty-Free Cosmetics in Sherman Oaks, which carries Montales, Amouages and hard-to-find fragrances, oud is a hit. "When you introduce oud to someone coming from the mass market, they're shocked. They have to get used to it," says co-owner Jeannette Dolbakian, who, for novices, recommends lighter Montales like Aoud Amber Rose.

By 2007, Tom Ford ushered in the era of more wearable ouds with the scent Oud Wood, a blend including sweet rosewood, sandalwood, spice, vetiver and vanilla. And within a span of several years, the classic French houses Guerlain, Dior and Caron all released oud scents. Among the niche houses, Juliette Has a Gun, Le Labo, Bond, Armani Privé, Bryredo and Kilian have all brought out fragrances that ably illustrate the kinder, gentler facets of oud.

Quite interestingly, Kilian's take-no-prisoners Pure Oud is by Calice Becker, known for her fruity tea florals Tommy Girl and J'Adore, while L'Artisan's Al Oudh is by Bertrand Duchaufour, who has traded his usual ethereal smoke for a brimstone furnace.


Some have been known to lament that European perfumery has tamed oud for Western noses. When squeaky-clean cologne queen Jo Malone released the lemony Oud & Bergamot last year, there was talk that oud had finally jumped the perfumery shark.

But we live in a mashup culture. If starter ouds at the malls eventually lead customers to Montale's Black Aoud, I'm all for it.

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Its perfume and it stinks. People who wear perfume stink. I long for the day when people become intelligent and educated enough to realize that perfume is expensive, disgusting, and not necessary.

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Its part of the Muslim religion to smell nice.

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