

## BEAUTY

# Inside India's Niche Fragrance Takeover

A new crop of local perfume brands are reclaiming indigenous ingredients and reviving ancient fragrance-making techniques. But will that be enough to entice Indian consumers to swap international luxury perfumes for perfumes made at home?



Modern-Indian fragrance brands are re-imagining and reclaiming local, indigenous ingredients to bring forward a new perfumery language to the fragrance industry. (LilaNur)

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**BoF PROFESSIONAL**

## KEY INSIGHTS

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- A surge of homegrown and Indian-inspired niche fragrance brands are creating perfumes and oils using locally sourced ingredients and formulated with the country's oldest attar-making techniques.

- With a local and global market that has typically favoured the fragrances of larger luxury brands such as Chanel and Hermes, these emerging labels are up against the heft and heritage of long-standing brands.
- Still, by using omni-channel strategies such as in-store experiences, pop-ups and digital storytelling, niche labels are cultivating an audience keen on buying authentic products born and bred in India.

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Arjun Sampath, founder of Indian-based skincare and perfume brand Soma Ayurvedic, believes the topography of his motherland including its soil culture, altitude and humidity, make it home to some of the most supreme quality ingredients across the globe. Fittingly, Soma Ayurvedic's Mysur Sandalwood perfume oil is made using sandalwood sourced from Kerala and is formulated in Kannauj, an Indian city where the ancient art of perfumery and attar-making predates modern fragrance-making techniques used by behemoths Firmenich and Givaudan.

“India has the richest olfactory history, dating back to the Silk Route,” said Sampath. “It has the finest jasmine in the world, the finest sandalwood in Mysore, oud in Assam and tuberose in Southern India. I've seen how jasmine is harvested in Madurai and how it is distilled into an absolute form that is higher in concentration than anywhere else in the world.”

Soma Ayurvedic is part of a league of luxury niche perfumers born and bred in India. Call of The Valley, LilaNur Parfums, Bombay Perfumery, Ajmal Perfumes and Naso Profumi are all modern-Indian fragrance brands re-imagining and reclaiming local, indigenous ingredients to bring forward a novel and exciting new perfumery language to the fragrance industry today. And they are finding success. Launched direct-to-consumer in 2020, Soma Ayurvedic's Mysur Sandalwood won a Best of Beauty award from *Allure* last year, and is often likened to Le Labo's Santal 33.

By infusing traditional perfume-making techniques and Indian ingredients into their own signature blends, these homegrown brands are carving out a niche that is set to grow. According to research firm Euromonitor International, the premium fragrances market in India is forecasted to grow from \$198.5 million today to \$228.2 million by 2024. However, independent labels are up against the heft of large and long-standing brands like Hermes and Chanel that often use India's high-quality ingredients for their own scents. Still, emerging brands believe that with fine-tuned omnichannel strategies, educational storytelling and experiential events, they can win over not only the Indian consumer, but the global shopper as well.

“A conscious consumer [is] interested in the source of the best ingredients, where they are found and who is making the most authentic product today,” said Sampath. “[That] has led us back to the perfumery traditions of India.”

## The Naming Game

India's olfactory culture is everywhere — on its streets, in its homes and in how women wear flowers in their hair. Spices, herbs and fragrant flowers are an inherent part of a culture that dates back thousands of years. While ever present, homegrown brands and India-inspired brands are now seeing the opportunity to reclaim their heritage.

“In my many years of working within the international fine fragrance industry ... The breadth of India's natural ingredients is the greatest story never told,” said Paul Austin, co-creator of LilaNur Parfums. “I was erroneously taught that the word ‘vetiver’ comes from the French language, and I would argue that 99 percent of the industry still thinks that.”

It took Austin going to India for sourcing to realise that ‘vetiver’ is, in fact, the Tamil word: vettiveyr. Many other such misconceptions, such as the notion that Indian beauty products are not of high quality, surround a fragrance industry where India has remained in the background thus far.

Newer labels are doing a better job of calling attention to India's vast heritage, inclusive of local ingredients and practices. LilaNur's Jasmine Attar Absolu is made using jasmine sambac and jasmine grandiflorum cultivated in Madurai by Jasmine C.E., India's largest source of floral absolutes for the international fine fragrance industry. Mumbai-based Call of The Valley's fragrance offerings, Henna, Ganga Clay, Jasmine Sambac and Sandal Rose use jasmine from Madurai and white ginger lily from Sikkim, which are mixed using the ancient deg and bhapka hydrodistillation method used in Kannauj. The brand makes this clear to customers by explaining the method with images and the provenance of ingredients on its website. Meanwhile, Bombay Perfumery's Chai Musk fragrance inspired by the Indian masala tea boasts lemongrass and ginger sourced from corners of India's vast forests and agricultural expanse. The distinct fragrance, crafted keeping an Indian audience and climate in mind, makes up 20 percent of the brand's sales today.

A growing global shift towards apothecary-inspired beauty and skincare, **as well as a mainstreaming of Ayurveda**, is leading to a fragrance revolution in the country, according to experts. Moreover, cleaner aesthetics and fragrance names that celebrate the ingredients or the places they come from have benefitted Indian-founded brands.

“When was the last time you saw a new brand ... [with] names like Ecstasy and Obsession being coined for new fragrances?” said Manan Gandhi, who founded Bombay Perfumery in 2016. Instead, the line launched with fragrance names that denote its origin such as Calicut, Madurai Talkies, and Blushing Oud.

## Cultivating An Audience

For Call of The Valley, Bombay Perfumery and others hoping to make a mark in India's growing fragrance movement, educating consumers about Indian ingredients, their applications in the global perfuming world and the country's own perfume-making traditions are critical to customer awareness.

“The appeal of homegrown fragrance brands lies in the ingredients they use,” said Gopal Asthana, CEO of online retailer Tata Cliq. The e-tailer was one of the early stockists of Bombay Perfumery, adding the label to its luxe category, to automatically filter through to a customer with more disposable income. Bombay Perfumery's perfumes are priced between INR 3,900(\$47) and 4,100 (\$49) with the brand's Chai Musk sold at INR 4,100 (\$49) – a price that has remained unchanged since 2016. In comparison, a similar size bottle of Chanel No.5 retails for approx \$172. Some of the brand's other stockists include boutique stores such as Paper Boat Collective in Goa, One Zero Eight by Save The Loom in Kochi, Dhora in Jaipur, Bombaim in Kolkata and Naushad Ali in Puducherry, where a demand for homegrown brands is increasing with a rise in purchasing power.

But premium shelf space in brick-and-mortar stores or prime spots on e-commerce platforms like Nykaa or Tira Beauty are typically reserved for established international labels, which poses a challenge for upcoming brands hoping to find distribution, said Gandhi. This has encouraged emerging fragrance brands to create pathways for themselves.

For LilaNur, it was an outside-in approach that enabled greater awareness in its home country. In 2021, the brand launched at Bergdorf Goodman, Harrods, Neiman Marcus and Moda Operandi before bringing it back to its home market in Dec. 2023. For its Indian launch, co-founder Anita Lal created dedicated shops in two of her Mumbai and Delhi Good Earth lifestyle stores, along with the store's web boutique. LilaNur will be launching in a third Good Earth store in Mumbai later this year.

“While the luxury perfume markets in London, New York and India share some commonalities, such as a desire for quality and exclusivity, there are substantial differences in terms of consumer behaviour, preferences, brand presence and market maturity,” said Lal. “The markets in London and New York are more established and diverse, while the Indian market, whilst growing rapidly, is still nascent and developing.”

Bombay Perfumery and Call of The Valley sell primarily on their own e-commerce platforms and a handful of third-party boutiques. Sensory experiences that spotlight Indian ingredients in food and fragrance, and pop-ups in cities outside of metros have been ways brands are cultivating their growing audiences. For example, Bombay Perfumery typically pairs perfume-making experiences with commercial endeavours. At Le Mill in Mumbai in 2019, the store space was used to host an evening of chocolate and perfume sampling; the brand even collaborated with Chef Pratik Bakhtiani of Ether Atelier to make chocolates using several ingredients from Bombay Perfumery scents.

“Like with anything, I think one has a finer appreciation for something when you know the painstaking effort and labour of love that has gone into making it,” said Lal. “I believe people are more likely to connect to a fragrance when they know the memories, culture and heritage it holds in its scent. This is a great time for brands like ours to be at the forefront of educating people about India’s giant contribution to perfumery and its olfactive heritage that runs very deep in the country and beyond.”

#### **FURTHER READING**

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At the second annual BEAUTY&YOU India Awards, created by The Estée Lauder Companies’ New Incubation Ventures in partnership with Nykaa, nine brands and creatives representing the future of Indian beauty, innovation and creativity were awarded cash grants and mentorship. BoF also hosted a series of panel talks with some of India’s most celebrated creatives and entrepreneurs, including Katrina Kaif, Lakshmi Menon, Bandana Tewari, Anaita Shroff Adajania, Diipa Büller-Khosla, Masaba Gupta and Anita Lal.

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New Incubation Ventures expands the scope and scale of the second edition of the Beauty & You India awards programme to celebrate the significant contributions of the beauty ecosystem and to continue its mission to discover, spotlight and propel the next generation of Indian beauty.