

The perfume that harnesses the monsoon

Years ago, an Indian acquaintance told me of a particularly special perfume, one that is a distillation of the first rains of the monsoon. I'd long wanted to find it – but with the modern proliferation of synthetic-based scents, traditional *attars*, or oil-based perfumes, are increasingly hard to source. [Gulab Singh Johrimal](#) in Old Delhi, I was told, is likely to have it.

Gulab Singh Johrimal has been dispensing attars for more than 200 years. Soon after rolling up the shutters in the morning, the perfumery attracts a steady stream of visitors of all stripes, from well-dressed women with cut-glass accents to teenage suitors buying a scent for their paramour. All know Gulab Singh Johrimal as the house of sublime scents.



Gulab Singh Johrimal has been selling attars in Old Delhi for more than 200 years (Credit: Peter Lopeman/Alamy)

Dariba Kalan, the bustling, narrow street that is home to the perfumery, is just off Chandhi Chowk, Old Delhi's main thoroughfare. The old city, first built in 1659, is the walled former capital of the erstwhile Mughal Empire,

and Chandni Chowk was once a wide and graceful boulevard bisected by a canal and dotted with intricate buildings.

But now, its former beauty has been swallowed up by the masses. When I arrived at Gulab Singh Johrimal at 10 am, the street was teeming with cars, buses and rickshaws, humans, horses and the occasional goat also trying to carve out space.

The shop was barely distinguishable from the outside. Its interior was unadorned and functional – a handful of men sat behind a counter, waiting on customers. But a closer look revealed much more: carved wooden shelving, a still-ticking vintage clock and a small sign bearing the year of the shop's inauguration – 1816.

The shop is currently run by Praful Gundhi, along with his brothers, father and uncle. "Me and my brothers are seventh generation in this shop," Gundhi told me proudly, adding that a nephew has recently joined the business, ushering in the eighth generation.



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(Credit: PhotosIndia.com LLC/Alamy)

Sadly, not much is known about the shop's history. Gundhi thinks it might

have been ransacked during the 1857 conflict between Indian soldiers and the British, but cannot be certain as no records were kept. He pulled out a large coffee-table book of Indian history and turned to a page showing a two-dimensional drawing of a perfume shop in Old Delhi. Although the old drawing doesn't name the shop, Gundhi believes it is Gulab Singh Johrimal.

"We have a box like the box in it, and we once had a set of steps leading up to us, just like this one," he said, pointing out each feature.

I sat at the counter while Gundhi brought out perfume after perfume, all of them distillations of flowers: *mogra* (an Indian variety of jasmine), lotus, frangipani and *khus*, or vetiver root. The most precious of all is the pure rose oil, which costs more than 33,000 rupees for 10ml. Its smell is subtle, yet ambrosial.

"We sell mostly Indian perfumes, which are made by distilling flowers the traditional way," Gundhi said, as he unscrewed the lid of yet another bottle and proffered it towards me.

He explained that steam distillation, an ancient process dating back thousands of years, was most likely revived in India by the Mughal rulers who came from Central Asia in the Middle Ages. The process involves suspending flowers and other objects over boiling water in a sealed container. The essential oil contained in the steam is then extracted.



To release their aromas, scented items are suspended over boiling water in a sealed container (Credit: Sajjad Hussain/Stringer/Getty)

“We use copper vessels and bamboo pipes for the distillation process, which were what were used at that time, so the technology has not changed that much,” Gundhi said.

While the shop has its own rose plantation to make a limited run of rose attar each year, it mostly buys perfumes made in the Uttar Pradesh town of Kannauj - the centre of attar production in India - and sources different scents from all over India. I smelled my way through a sampler box, dabbing the oil into my skin to release the scent. *Kewra* (pandanus), which has a nutty aroma with hints of saffron, comes from the eastern state of Orissa, while sweet and heady jasmine comes from Coimbatore in the south.

Finally we reached the one I’d come for: attar *mitti*, or *gill* (*mitti* means ‘earth’, while *gill* means ‘wet’, so the words are used interchangeably when referring to the perfume). Grinning, Gundhi rubbed a drop on my hand, watching my reaction closely.

The oil emitted a rich, warm and woody fragrance. After numerous years

in Delhi, I have many times experienced the juicy scent of the first rains hitting the parched summer earth, though I probably would not recognise it in attar form. Gundhi notes that timing is key: people like to wear the aroma in the height of summer, as it carries a visceral olfactory reminder of the monsoon, bringing a sense of relief.



Steamed earthenware and water are used to recreate the scent of the monsoon (Credit: randomclicks/Alamy)

“Right now it’s spring, so the smell doesn’t have much impact,” Gundhi said. “But as it gets hotter, people want to wear this more as they wait for the monsoon. They appreciate it much more then.”

So how exactly is it made? As I inhaled the earthy aroma, I pictured workers waiting for the first raindrops, then scooping up huge mounds of damp red soil and heaping them in wide copper bowls for distillation. Turns out I wasn’t too far off.

“To recreate the smell, we get lots of broken earthenware in big copper vessels, put water in that and heat it up,” Gundhi explained.

It’s the smell of the monsoon.

The steam from the vessel is passed over sandalwood oil; the oil

captures the scent from the steam, and the water is separated out. "When you smell this perfume, the base note is sandalwood, but the top note is the first rain after summers," he continued. "It's the smell of the monsoon."

Just then, a genteel couple entered the shop. "Do you have the oil of *raat ki rani*?" the woman asked, referring to a variety of night-blooming jasmine.

"No ma'am, but we do have tuberose, another flower of the night," Gundhi replied. He shuffled through his stocks and emerged with an antique cut-glass jug.

The woman looked at her hands, searching for a clean spot. "I've tried so many flower oils, the bees are going to chase me down the street!" she joked.



Attar mitti brings a sense of relief during hot Indian summers (Credit: Sajjad Hussain/Stringer/Getty)

She then asked for mitti. "I teach yoga and meditation in Germany for part of the year, and I tell Europeans that we have a perfume based on mud, and they just don't believe me," she said.

We both bought a bottle and exited the shop. Already, the air was growing warmer with each passing day. At the very height of the searing North Indian summer, I plan to dab my mitti attar on my wrist, take a sniff and feel relief.

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