

ATTARS

What is an attar?

Attar is a Persian and Arabic word meaning fragrance, scent or essence. An attar is a specific type of fragrance product first produced by Avicenna, who is considered to be the greatest individual physician who ever lived. Although attars can include some individual essential oils that are used in their own right as suitable fragrances i.e. sandalwood, patchouli, lavender etc., many attars are combinations of oils – sometimes as many as 30 or 40 blended together according to centuries-old secret Attari family formulas. Most scents are obtained from the Middle and Near East and Indian sub-continent using traditional methods of collecting and gathering flower blossoms and immersing them in a base oil, usually a near-scentless sandalwood. These are the same fragrances used by both men and women of the East for centuries, to create spiritual beauty. Ancient healers and prophets of centuries gone by used fragrant oils to enhance mood, adjust emotions and uplift the soul. Attars can be used to treat the whole person: physically, emotionally and spiritually.

Spiritual aromatherapy

The sufi tradition developed the spiritual use of aromatherapy by relating different scents to the stations the soul passes through on its journey of return to the Creator and to the various physical, mental and spiritual illnesses that reflect the soul's growth through the respective stages of the soul:

1. The station of egotism (Maqam è Nafs)
2. The station of the heart (Maqam è Qalb)
3. The station of pure spirit (Maqam è Ruh)
4. The station of divine secrets (Maqam è Sirr)
5. The station of proximity or nearness to God (Maqam è Qurb)
6. The station of union with the Beloved (Maqam è Wisaal)

Avicenna

Abu Ali Ibn Sina, known in the West as Avicenna, invented the process of steam distillation and was the first person ever to distil the oil of rose. It was he who developed the use of attars for physical ailments using specific scientific formulas. He designed an elaborate system whereby attars and flowers were assigned *akhlat* or temperaments, which allowed treatment of physical conditions by considering the inherent imbalance and temperament of an individual and re-balancing with an attar of an appropriate temperament.

Source and quality of attars

The source and quality of floral oils and attars is important, because only if the oil is true and pure can proper effects be achieved, especially in the realm of the soul. The attars we use are obtained via steam distillation or enfleurage methods without any chemical dilution or preservatives added during processing.

There is also no child labour used or negative environmental effects caused as a result of the manufacturing or processing of these attars. Furthermore, due to the religious traditions of most of the manufacturers, no alcohol is used. The manufacturing plants supplying the oils are visited regularly to ensure strict conditions of purity and quality are met.

In authentic natural perfumery, it is nearly always the case that several natural oils are blended together to produce a final scent that is pleasing and unique. This is because absolutes and concentrated essential oils in their natural state are often not only prohibitively expensive, but also often irritating to the skin and some i.e. true jasmine, myrrh, and rose in their absolute form are not appealing fragrances.

Common methods used to obtain oils

The word 'perfume' used in the West to describe a scent, originates from the French 'par fume', "*through smoke*", because it was common to release essential aetheric qualities of oils by burning. The word 'perfume' is now unfortunately used to describe synthetic perfumes. Most methods now used in perfumery use synthetic and chemical solvents i.e. alcohol to extract the essential oils. Oils obtained using hydraulic expression, steam distillation and enfleurage are correctly termed 'essential oils', but they still may vary in density, quality and action.

Traditional deg steam distillation method:

Attar distillation differs from the steam distillation methods used in Europe and North America. Attars today are still manufactured according to the traditional methods of over 1,000 years ago in *degs* or large copper stills. These stills are heated from below by direct fire. The deg is filled with flowers or petals, water is added and the copper lid sealed with a mixture of cotton and clay. The heating causes pressure to build up in the still and the scent of the attars is obtained by condensing vapours into a base oil, commonly an almost unperfumed type of sandalwood oil. A *dighaa* or attendant watches and monitors the still with great skill to maintain precise temperatures for individual attars by regularly feeling the outside of the still and listening for variation in sounds from within it. Once the correct moment arrives, the *dighaa* wraps a wet cloth around the still to temporarily halt the distillation process. The process may be repeated several times, with more flowers added.

Enfleurage:

Enfleurage is a French word meaning 'to saturate with perfume scent'. It is a method used in France, the Middle East and in India, where it is referred to as 'cold-rolling'. Base oil, usually olive oil or sandalwood oil is placed in a large stone trough. The flowers or petals are placed inside a large cheesecloth, rolled up and submerged in oil. Once the oils in the floral substance have mixed with the base oil, the cheesecloth is removed and the flowers are replaced with fresh ones and the procedure repeated as many as 30 to 40 times.

How to use attars

As a fragrance:

Only a few drops are required. The etiquette in receiving an attar in the East is to offer the right hand palm down and allow the attar to be applied over the top and back of the hand. This may then be rubbed on the chin and cheeks and across the wrists and the front of the shirt.

As an incense:

According to Avicenna, this action of heating the oil has the strongest effect on the bodily essences, especially on the heart. 2-4 drops can be placed on self-igniting charcoal or placed in a burner, as you would use an essential oil.

For emotional and mental conditions:

For emotional and mental imbalances, 1-2 drops are placed on a tiny piece of cotton wool the size of a small pea. This is then inserted under the ridge of the RIGHT ear above the opening. It is at this point that the 5 main cranial nerves form a juncture and the essence is absorbed via the cells in the skin and has an immediate effect on the mind and emotions.

Please note: the cotton wool ball should not be placed inside the ear.

For body massage:

For physical imbalances, attars can be used with a carrier oil such as olive oil or sweet almond oil at a ratio of 2-4 ml to 120 ml base oil.

For bathing:

Place a couple of drops in a small amount of milk and mix to disperse and then add to a bath full of warm water.