

Design Resource

## Attars

Perfumes of Old Delhi

by

Sakshi Gambhir

IDC, IIT Bombay

Source:

<https://dsource.in/resource/attars>



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Source:

<https://dsource.in/resource/attars/introduction>

## Introduction

Attars are like flowers - as old as the ages but as fresh as tomorrow's dew drops. The subtle blending of the various aromas is very likely the creation of melody. This is called an accord and constitutes of the base note, middle note and top note (top note being the most volatile one and the base note being the most long lasting one). And like Indian music's various ragas, the use of attars matches the seasons of the year. Indian perfumes have never been classified separately for men and women. They have an inherent oriental charm. That is why they stand out in the world of perfumes. As Praful Gundhi, the perfumer puts it: "Perfume making is art, science, creativity, hard work and research all rolled into one."

Gulab Singh Johri Mal, one of the most well known shops of Old Delhi, was established in 1816 mainly as an attar manufacturing business by Gulab Singh Ji and his son Johri Mal Ji. It is said that during the reign of Akbar Shah II, the nobility including the Nawabs, Rajas, landlords and subedars sat for hours with Gulab Singh Ji delicately sniffing and selecting the attars (Indian perfumes).



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<https://dsource.in/resource/attars/place>

## Place

For 196 years, this company has been spreading fragrance from its head office in Dariba Kalan; one of the oldest retail markets of Old Delhi. This 'lane of silversmiths', as it is popularly called, has more of the old world atmosphere. The shops here are heavily carved sturdy wooden columns framing the glass showcases, housing the attar cut-glass decanters. The retail outlet in Chandni Chowk was started later on but has as much footfall of customers now as the older shop. The quickest way to reach here is to take the Delhi Metro. The company also has a factory at Rama road (Delhi) and several local distillation units in various parts of the country.



Chandni Chowk metro station

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Inside the Delhi Metro



Streets of Old Delhi



Dariba Kalan ('the lane of silversmiths')

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Dilapidated buildings of Chandni Chowk



Gulab Singh Johri Mal (retail shop) in Chandni Chowk

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Gulab Singh Johri Mal (retail shop) in Dariba Kalan



Kishan Mohan ji, the sixth generation of the perfume making tradition



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Kushal Gundhi, the eight generation



Inside the retail shop in Chandhi Chowk



Inside the retail shop in Dariba Kalan



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Praful Gundhi, the seventh generation of the perfume making tradition



Testers of the various attars (perfumes)

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## People

Gulab Singh Ji and Johri Mal Ji, the founders of the company, constitute the first and second generation of this family business. Three more generations carried the perfume-making tradition forward, after which Ram Singh Ji and Kishan Mohan Singh Ji took over. Both of them are the oldest living members (of the sixth generation) who know the secret formulae of the attars.

The seventh generation of the family - Naveen Gundhi, Atul Gundhi, Praful Gundhi and Mukul Gundhi have chosen to write their surname as 'Gundhi', which comes from the word 'Sugundh', meaning perfume. Kushal and Vishad Gundhi, the eighth generation, are the youngest perfumers in the family. Most of them have studied advanced chemistry (and related courses). In all, about forty people work for the company.



Kishan Mohan ji

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Praful Gundhi



Kushal Gundhi

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<https://dsource.in/resource/attars/process>

## Process

Even now the process of making attar is as complicated and delicate as it was in the olden days. The flowers used for making these are found in different parts of India. For Ruh Gulab, flowers are grown in Sikatra and Ghazipur (U.P.), for Chameli and Motia, flowers are procured from Sikandarpur and some villages in Varanasi. Kewra, Frangi-pani, Molsari and Harshingar are distilled in Orissa. The firm has distillation units in all these places.



Distillation



Bottling

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## Distillation

Distillation is carried out in the flowering season only and produces enough stock to last the entire year. For this, fresh flowers have to be plucked at dawn and used before sunrise as fragrances begin to diminish after sunrise. They are put into a metal container along with water. A lid is sealed onto this vessel, which is then heated from the bottom. The vapors pass through a condensing tube, and get collected in another vessel submerged in water. This oil is called 'attar'. Oils obtained like this are generally distilled into a wood base such as sandalwood and then aged. Ageing period varies from one to ten years, depending on the result desired. Attars can be left pure (natural attars) or blended with other aromatic chemical compounds (synthetic attars). Natural ones are obviously more expensive.

Attar's floral group is primarily of Rose, Jasmine, Champa, Molsari, Harshingar and Tuberose. Among the woods and barks used are Sandal, Cinnamon and Aloewood. Roots of Vetivar and Ginger along with heavy odors of vegetable Musk, Patchouli, Amber, spices and herbs are of great value.

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Rose flower plucked before sunrise



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Rose flower



Rose flower plucked before sunrise



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Rose flower plucked before sunrise



Water being poured in



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The vessel being sealed with a lid



The vessel being sealed with a lid



Distillation begins



The vessels being heated from bottom



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The vessel at the other end of the tube in which the 'attar' is collected



The vessel at the other end of the tube in which the 'attar' is collected



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## Bottling

After the attars are blended well, they are poured into glass bottles to be sold. These decanters were earlier being imported from Belgium and Czechoslovakia but now they are sourced from Firozabad, the glass city of India. The basic ones are plain with a plastic stopper and metal cap. These are labeled with the name of the essence they contain. The fancy bottles have cut-glass work, hand-painting or luster on them. These ornate tiny crystal bottles are called itardans. Packaging graphics for all the products are extremely basic and mostly depend on the requirement of the buyer (or exporter).



'Attar' being sucked into the syringe, to be poured into glass bottles



'Attar' being sucked into the syringe, to be poured into glass bottles



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'Attar' being sucked into the syringe, to be poured into glass bottles



Attar being bottled



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The labeled metallic bottles containing the attars



The labeled metallic bottles containing the attars



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Plastic stoppers



Glass bottles with attars and stoppers



Labels of the essence that the bottles contain

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Metal caps being wound onto the glass bottles



Bottled attars with labels



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Bottled attars with labels



Check-list!



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Beautifully hand-painted and cut-glass itardans



Beautifully hand-painted itardans



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Beautifully hand-painted itardans



Tiny crystal itardans

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A box containing different types of attars

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## Products

With the changing times and needs of the customer, the company has diversified into several other products besides traditional Indian attars. These include incense cones, incense sticks, dhoop battis, essential oils, incense oils, toilet soaps, perfumes, kewra water, rose water and jasmine body oil (also called the 'king of oils'). Attars are usually sniffed ('tested') first, using paper strips and then bought.

Experts believe that there is a huge scope for India's perfume market. They say that the Indian industry needs to take pride in the art of attar making, reorienting and reorganizing itself with the age-old wisdom and knowledge of the craft. As a Mughal poet once rightly wrote: "A drop of attar is worth a billion words."

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A packet containing agarbattis (incense sticks)



Attar testers



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Attar testers and stock in the shop



Attar testers and stock in the shop

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A box containing different types of attars



A box containing different types of attars



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A box containing different types of attars



Small incense sticks



Incense stick boxes



Incense stick box

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Incense cones



Dhooop battis



Incense sticks



Soaps

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Incense cones



A variety of products on display outside the shop in Dariba Kalan



Room fresheners

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Cooler perfumes



Incense sticks



Incense cones and sticks



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Diffuser oil with reed sticks



Incense cones



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Source:

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## Contact Details

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