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Essence And Alchemy: A Natural History Of Perfume



Synopsis

Publishers Weekly called this unique title an "extraordinary treatise on the history and making of perfume" and hails author Mandy Aftel's ability to "bring sheer delight in the bouquet of aromas in the natural world" and her "irreverent sensibility that embraces 'little-acknowledged' aphrodisiacs like the smell of sweat." Renowned perfumer Mandy Aftel explores the primal nature and fundamental importance of aroma in everyday life, teaching people about the nature of smell and the idea of "olfactory consciousness" in *Essence and Alchemy: A Natural History of Perfume*. With gorgeous illustrations, the book also serves as a practical guide to making custom scents for a variety of uses, and explains the process of selecting "base notes", "heart notes" and "head notes" to create truly personal aromas and perfumes. Writer and perfumer Mandy Aftel was a founder and chief perfumer of all-natural perfume company Grandiflorum, and went on to create Aftelier, a company that concentrates exclusively on creating custom perfumes for men and women. As an authority on natural essences and custom perfumes, she has participated in panels for the perfume industry, and demonstrated and taught the art of natural perfumery across the nation. Her work has been featured in publications including *In Style*, *Vogue*, *W Magazine*, *Self*, *O (Oprah) Magazine*, *Allure*, *Health* and *Elle*. "Smelling her extraordinary collection of oils took me to beautiful places I have never been before. The fragrance that Mandy Aftel blended exclusively for me is full of citrus and herbal fragrances that complement my culinary life." --Alice Waters, Executive Chef and Owner celebrated restaurant *Chez Panisse* "Reading Mandy Aftel on perfume is like listening to Mozart on original instruments-it's a revelation of tone and technique. She captures the sensuous pleasure of working with fragrance oils and the intellectual delight of composing in scent. Her book combines a perfumer's sensibility with the authority of a historian and the passion of an enthusiast." --Avery Gilbert, President of the Sense of Smell Institute

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Customer Reviews

To this most extraordinary treatise on the history and making of perfume, Aftel, a writer and aroma designer, brings sheer delight in the bouquet of aromas in the natural world, as well as a "love for arcana" and an irreverent sensibility that embraces "little-acknowledged" aphrodisiacs like the smell of sweat. Smell is one of the most primal senses: even newborns orient first toward the smell of their mothers' milk. And world history is full of the manipulation of smell, she reveals, starting with the palace perfumers of ancient Egypt; the Israelite women who concocted essences for temple sacrifices; the Romans, who anointed nearly everything; the alchemists, who searched for the Divine Essence; all the way up to modern pheromone researchers who hope, finally, "to snare the sex drive." Aftel traces this history with witty anecdotes (Ben Franklin's plea for a drug to make sweet-smelling farts, Petrus Castellus's advice to rub civet directly on the penis) and well-chosen alchemical and botanical illustrations. After this seductive introduction, she shifts into the how-to mode, discussing the actual making of a scent, a process of selecting certain "base notes," adding "heart notes" and finally the "top chords." Her emphasis is on experimenting, and developing an "olfactory consciousness." Since organically based perfumes interact with the wearer, they must be designed for a particular user, not vice versa, as with commercial, synthetically based products. Aftel provides some sample formulas and concludes with a roundup of romantic, bathing and spiritual uses of perfumes. Agent, Peter Matson. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This is by Mandy Aftel, who is an all-natural perfumer in Berkeley. She comes out of the same movement for the best natural ingredients that created Chez Panisse [restaurant], also in Berkeley, which started the foodie revolution. This is a wonderful, swoony, sensual book. She gives you the history of perfume through the ages, from the ancient Egyptians and Assyrians. She talks about how people have moved away from the idea of perfume as a ritualistic, meditative, aesthetic creation. The mass marketing of perfume, which includes a lot of synthetics and chemicals, has taken away a lot from the original idea of what perfume was and should be. Aftel started her own atelier to make perfumes. She uses natural ingredients, so no synthetics, no chemicals, no fixatives.

The downside is that all-natural perfumes don't last that long, maybe two hours maximum. But she has striven to show that you can make elegant, complex, interesting, beautiful perfumes using all natural ingredients. She holds workshops where you can make your own perfume. The book is really a primer to go back to the roots and the ancient ideas of what perfume is all about. She talks about the meditative nature of certain essences, and notes their healing properties and the transcendental element of perfumery. It's also gorgeously written. People have read this book and developed their own interest in making perfume. It's a seminal, inspirational book that many people cite. Earlier I mentioned the Swiss perfumer Andy Tauer. He trained as a chemist. He told me he read Mandy's book, and after that he decided he wanted to make perfume. He started experimenting in a home laboratory, just mixing ingredients, and his first perfume was called "L'Air du Desert Marocain". It was a huge hit. Luca Turin gave it five stars and called it a masterpiece. Tauer is now a highly recognised niche perfumer. He's not a completely natural perfumer, but he uses up to 50% natural ingredients which is huge these days. There are many perfumes that use just a few percentage points of real ingredients and the rest is synthetic. That's not to say you can't make perfumes using all or mainly synthetics. There are some wonderful perfumers out there with very modern takes on perfumery such as Comme des Garçons and they have no problem using synthetics. This book has inspired a generation of perfumers, and it brought people back to the original idea of what perfume was supposed to be. Mandy Aftel is a very spiritual person, who is able to meld the spiritual and ritualistic elements of perfumery with the pure, hedonistic, sensual beauty of it. (Denise Hamilton The Browser 2011-10-04)

It is worth purchasing and reading for the beginning natural, artistry perfumer or kitchen witch but probably not going to be an easy read for empirically minded chemistry types. This is a book by Mandy Aftel, the artist and professional perfumer. It is about her personal "alchemy" as it relates to the art of perfumery as she sees it. This is not an alchemy or science based perfumery text. It's one artisans personal and practical philosophy on the artistry of perfume making with some perfume history and practical information to be gleaned by the eager or tolerant and patient reader. Despite the authors extensive use of hyperbole and lack of clear organization of some of the material there is a lot to be gleaned from this book for beginners who aren't ready to dive head first into expensive or hard to find archaic perfumery texts or chemistry tomes. There are some tables of useful information that clearly outline which oil combinations are historically harmonious or that she finds harmonious and offers some simple formulas, harmonies and accords for the beginning perfumer to

start with - although you will need at least \$200-\$300 worth of materials which you might already mostly have. This book is about perfumery and how to blend perfumes from traditional "natural" materials (essential oils, absolutes, concretes, natural fixatives and animal products predominantly) for beginning perfumers. It seems like most of the material in this book is aggregated from other historical sources but then again I don't think one can write about how to make perfumes without going into the historical blending of perfumery; it seems like every book I've read so far on the subject does the same thing including the more science based books. If you are wanting to learn more about the science of perfumery from a modern or more empirical perspective filled with technical information then this is definitely NOT the right book for you. If you are wanting an "inspirational", emotive filled how-to from the perspective of a professional artisan in order to get your feet wet then you will be able to glean useful information, it all depends on your leanings and/or tenacity - I didn't find it that inspiring personally. As an artist I got a lot out of it on a materials based and intuitive process kind of way. As an empirical leaning, science based beginning perfumer I was frustrated by the meanderings, hyperbole & lack of organization. The author comes from her personal experience and philosophy as a professional perfumer and relates her experience in a way that makes it sound like her religion. She writes some philosophically based opinions into the text as though they are fact so be aware of guru-ism. It is clear that the writer feels a strong connection with perfumery's historical alchemical, guild based and apothecary roots and her insight comes from her practical knowledge and experience as both a professional and artist. Some might find her writing style inspirational due to her frequent use of metaphor and grandiosity. Despite what I found to be mostly fluff I think the author does a pretty good job of bringing the material down to a human level and makes perfumery approachable enough to start blending for most people. In case you can't tell I'm not fond of her writing style and am of the opinion that her writing style (or lack thereof) tends to cloud some of the value this book offers in the way of practical information. I'm sure she is a wonderful perfumer but a writer she is not. The alchemical aspect is not readily apparent besides the authors use of some "alchemical" terminology, exaggerations and hyping up the mysterious aspects of historical processes of perfumery, life and biology for effect. My wife reads archaic alchemy texts and couldn't get half way through this book. It seems that the alchemical reference is more for effect and marketing chaff in the same way jazz bands like to over use it. I'm sure she is well meaning and I'm sure she knows quite a bit about the history and contemplative process of alchemy, especially as it applies to her craft but it doesn't really come across in a way that is specifically related to alchemy in general for you practical or laboratory alchemy types. Instead it comes across as another marketing piece for the Aftel franchise way of doing things.

There is no doubting Mandy Aftel's nose. Its her writing that's open to question. Sorry.

Love, love, love! Very inspirational! Well written too!

This is such an amazing book. If you have interest in aromatherapy & creating beautiful scents then this is the book. Mandy is a great writer. This book has it all: history, objective information and interesting facts on the topic. I found it very helpful. The recipes she gives are wonderful. The scents that she creates are divine.

Loving this book! Purchased on download and needed the paperback for a better reference. So glad I purchased this. cant wait for her next book.

Informative and fun to read. For beginners, this book has all one needs to get started. The list of suppliers is useful too.

Very interesting book. Great resource for aromatherapy practioners

This book was an entertaining read, but it was hardly a good historical account of perfumery. It did have a brief overview at the beginning of the book, but it quickly goes into a collection of quotes and historical quirks about perfume. I think that the "alchemy" part of the book where the author repeatedly ties perfume making to the thought processes of alchemists gets old fast. While alchemical processes did play a part in perfume's beginning the parallels she draws seem to be more of her own making. I think this book also didn't quite live up to my expectations of a book to help a beginner start making their own perfume. It did list items a beginner needs and go into a discussion of the different notes and the ratios they need to be in, and it also described the characteristics of a sampling of fragrances as well. However, a majority of these passages seemed to drift into (and worse yet start out as) lengthy paragraphs on the "spiritual" aspects of perfume, while others simply dwell on the intangible and almost go as far to qualify as "purple prose". The author also has a preference of natural scents over synthetics which I don't have a problem with especially since she explained why, but she does mention that synthetics can cheaply extend natural scents for perfumers on a budget but at no time during the book does she discuss the use of synthetics for scents that cannot be naturally derived such as with the "ozone" smells. This book did

have a few recipes for scents (only about four I think), and it did have a list of beginning supplies as well some website retailers of these items, but no where did it go into a lot of detail as to why someone would want to do this on their own (given the large starting cost) outside of creating personalized scents. I think I would have liked the book better if there was more information or at least if the information contained was more easily accessible. As is, the useful parts of the book are often hidden between the author's comparison of perfumery to alchemy and while I may find the imagery of combining the sun and moon interesting it isn't incredibly relevant to what people who want to start making perfume need to know.

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