



A Nose for Kannauj

In India's ancient *attar* capital, perfume-tourism initiatives are reigniting interest in the city's fragrant heritage.

— by Charukesi Ramadurai

FLOWER POWER
Above, from left: A Perfume Tourism guest gathering blooms at a local rose field; the perfume bar at 24 MG Road.



When the sun begins to set over Kannauj, a small town in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, the M.L. Ramnarain Perfumers distillery comes to life. Its stone courtyard is soon filled with the heady fragrance of jasmine as farm workers carry in sack after sack of the freshly plucked flowers.

Off this courtyard is a cavernous room lit only by a few dim light bulbs and the smoky fires that blaze under copper cauldrons filled with water. The men hunched over these *deg* pay me little heed as they scoop in handfuls of milky-white petals, before sealing the lids of the pots with a clay mixture. Having learned the trade from their fathers and grandfathers, they have not just a nose but also an ear for their work, listening to the bubbling of the water and the hiss of steam to know when to add more wood to the fire or reduce the heat. Six hours later, they'll have distilled their first batch of *attar*, which is then bottled and left to age for a few months.

Attar refers to the traditional oil-based perfume gleaned from natural substances such as flowers, wood, and spices. Kannauj has been India's attar capital for over four centuries now, producing not only evergreen scents like rose, jasmine, marigold, vetiver, and saffron, but also the loamy *mitti* attar, which imitates the smell of rain-washed earth.

The alluvial Gangetic soil is perhaps what gives the roses and jasmines of this region their intoxicating aromas. Kannauj attar has been popular among Indian royals and aristocrats since Mughal times. It's also sought out by European perfume makers such as Givaudan, Charabot, and Firmenich, making Kannauj the Indian equivalent of Grasse, the hub of the French fragrance industry.

Locally, however, interest has dwindled in favor of the branded perfumes that have come to dominate

the domestic market. And Kannauj today is a sleepy place well away from the tourist trails of Lucknow or Agra, though both are just a few hours' drive away.

So it has fallen to a coterie of young entrepreneurs to breathe fresh air into their hometown's signature industry. One such is Pranav Kapoor, who recently launched the **Perfume Tourism** (perfume-tourism.com) trail I am following. An eighth-generation perfumer, Kapoor originally trained to be a professional chef, but his love for attar — instilled in him at a young age by his grandfather — proved too strong, pulling him back to Kannauj after stints in Mumbai and Delhi. Now, he's taking visitors behind the scenes in hopes of reigniting interest in the town's ancient perfume heritage.

SCENTS OF PLACE

Clockwise from right: A copper cauldron, or *deg*, used for boiling flower petals at the M.L. Ramnarain Perfumers distillery; jasmine buds; Pranav Kapoor sampling scents at 24 MG Road, his ancestral *haveli* turned guesthouse and perfume gallery.



After our distillery visit, Kapoor brings me to his ancestral home, **24 MG Road** ([instagram.com/24mgroad](https://www.instagram.com/24mgroad)), a 120-year-old *haveli* (mansion) that he has transformed into a fragrance gallery and single-suite guesthouse, where I'll be spending the night. There is also an intimate dining room offering a seven-course fragrance-paired degustation menu.

I sit down with Kapoor at his "perfume bar" to create my own fragrance. "Scent has the power to evoke memories and emotions," he says as I struggle to narrow down my choices from the dozens of options in front of me. "One whiff of a pleasantly familiar smell can take you right back to a happy moment or to a comforting place from your past," he adds, and that's when I know I want to make something that captures the smell of a holiday at the seaside.

We get to work, carefully adding notes of vanilla, cherry blossom, frangipani, and sea salt: drop, mix, sniff; drop, mix, sniff. Half an hour later, I have a vial of mildly floral attar to take home as a souvenir.

Later, Kapoor shows me sepia-tinted photos of his stylish, globetrotting grandparents posing with the European clients who once flocked to Kannauj. As I fall asleep in the same (albeit charmingly refurbished) room that accommodated these visiting gentlemen decades ago, I dream of being drenched in jasmine-scented rain showers.

Or perhaps I'm just recollecting my earlier visit to **Charkha Aromatic Farm** ([fb.com/charkhaaromaticfarm](https://www.facebook.com/charkhaaromaticfarm)), where I walked through century-old fields of jasmine to watch the workers skillfully pluck the freshest and whitest buds just before sundown. The farm's owner, Divy Gupta, is another of Kannauj's young fragrance entrepreneurs and the founder of **Raahi Parfums** (raahiparfums.com), a boutique perfumery that has been making waves with its slick packaging and clever marketing. His future plans include opening an Airbnb at the farm, which will give guests a first-hand glimpse into the entire elaborate process of attar making, from flower to bottle.

I also stop by the Tandon family residence, where siblings Varun and Krati launched their home business, **Boond Fragrances** (boondfragrances.com), in the midst of the pandemic, selling attar via Instagram. "We realized that Indians thought of attar as a heavy, old-fashioned perfume," Varun tells me. So they gave it an image makeover with pretty bottling accompanied by a personalized card inscribed with a soulful poem. They have been pleasantly surprised by the positive response from buyers not just in India, but around the world.

While half of Kannauj's population is engaged in the attar business in one way or another, the number of distilleries here has shrunk from 700 to a mere 100 in the past few decades. It's now up to the next generation of attar aficionados to ensure the town's aromatic legacy is carried into the future. **MA**