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FASHION



DUNE'S

REBECCA FERGUSON

FROM DAREDEVIL SPY TO SCI-FI MOM

WHY LIZZO
IS **OVER**
TALKING
ABOUT HER
BODY

GUCCI HACKS
BALENCIAGA
(and vice versa)



INSTAGRAM'S
MOST-HATED
BEAUTY
ACCOUNT

GOLD RUSH

Thanks to its unisex appeal and surprising versatility, oud—one of the oldest and most expensive fragrance ingredients in the world—gets a modern makeover.

By SOUZAN MICHAEL GALWAY

Generally speaking, it's rare for things like parasitic infestations, fungi and mould to signal the start of anything good. However, these usually-ick-inducing natural processes are necessary for producing one of the rarest and most expensive scent materials in the world: oud—the fragrance ingredient that's been used for centuries in the Middle East and is often referred to as “liquid gold.”

Oud, which can cost over \$100,000 a litre, is a by-product of a fungal infestation of the Southeast Asian Aquilaria tree and is created in its trunk and roots in response to said infestation. The result is the extract agarwood, otherwise known as oud. “It's sensual, animalistic and almost feral,” says French perfumer Francis Kurkdjian, founder

“OUD IS SENSUAL, ANIMALISTIC AND ALMOST FERAL. IT GIVES STRENGTH TO A FRAGRANCE, LIKE A BACKBONE.”

of the eponymous luxury fragrance brand. “Oud conveys a sense of mystery. Besides its signature smell, it gives strength to a fragrance, like a backbone.” That unique smell has been described as everything from musky, rich and smoky to bitter and damp. To put it simply: If you know, you know.

While the polarizing scent is still relatively uncommon in U.S. and European fragrance houses (Tom Ford's Oud Wood in 2007 was a defining moment for the woody note in the West, and Maison Francis Kurkdjian launched its first oud fragrance back in 2012), the use of oud in the Middle East can be traced back thousands of years, thanks in large part to its versatility. The material is used not only in perfumery but also for its aromatherapy benefits in spiritual practices, during which oud-oil-soaked wood chips are burned like incense (known in Arabic as *bakhoor*), and its medicinal and healing properties.

It was those healing properties that inspired Yasmin Charania Khan to launch her oud-based brand, Khalm Skincare, in 2020. “When I was growing up in Pakistan, my parents would light oud *agarbatti* [incense sticks], and then when I moved to the United States, I discovered that it was being used in high-end fragrances.” Charania Khan's love affair with oud was reignited with Creed's Royal Oud Eau de Parfum (whose 100-millilitre bottle will set you back a cool \$680), but she realized that the ancient ingredient still had plenty of untapped potential in the West. “My husband, who's a regenerative medicine physician, and I were heavy into oud research, and we learned that it has these amazing benefits beyond the scent aspect,” she says. “It has antioxidant and antimicrobial properties as well as an ability to elevate the mood. We were like, ‘Why has no one put oud into luxury skincare yet?’”

Khalm Skincare launched with a cleanser, an overnight oil elixir and a moisturizer, all



Maison Francis Kurkdjian Oud Eau de Parfum, \$390



Valmont Storie Veneziane Zafferano I, \$700



Khalm Skincare Overnight Oil Elixir, \$185



Emilie Heathie “A Night in Ayllón” Candle, \$73

of which are designed to be used by men and women—something that is widely thought of as a growing North American beauty industry trend and a recent one at that. But, says Charania Khan, “for those of us who grew up in the East, oud has always been something that both men and women have used. I think it's because the family units are so strong in those regions of the world; you're living within larger families and sharing your products in the household.”

“Men are wanting to go in a new direction with fragrance,” says Sophie Vann-Guillon, founder of Valmont's Storie Veneziane fragrance house. “They like oud, but they don't want it to be as strong and masculine.” This fall, the brand launched the latest addition to its fragrance collection: Zafferano I, a blend of oud and saffron. “It's very wearable and less aggressive” than pure oud, she says, adding that this not only lends to its unisex appeal but speaks to the younger generation's disregard for the rigidity of separating fragrance by gender: “My 23-year-old son wears the same fragrance as my daughter; I was inspired by that.”

While oud's bridge between the East and the West may involve increased subtlety via the addition of florals and other delicate scents (“What's the point of mimicking an oud-based scent just like the ones customers in the Middle East can get from their local perfume store?” asks Kurkdjian), make no mistake: The modern approach to oud is still not for the faint of heart. “It fills you up,” says Vann-Guillon. “It's generous, opulent and welcoming. It's the atmosphere of the Middle East in a bottle.”

“For those of us who grew up around oud, an appreciation of it is just in our DNA,” says Charania Khan. “Why does it smell different to different people? Some things in life just can't be explained; I think oud is one of those things. That's what makes it sacred.” ■