

# Forging

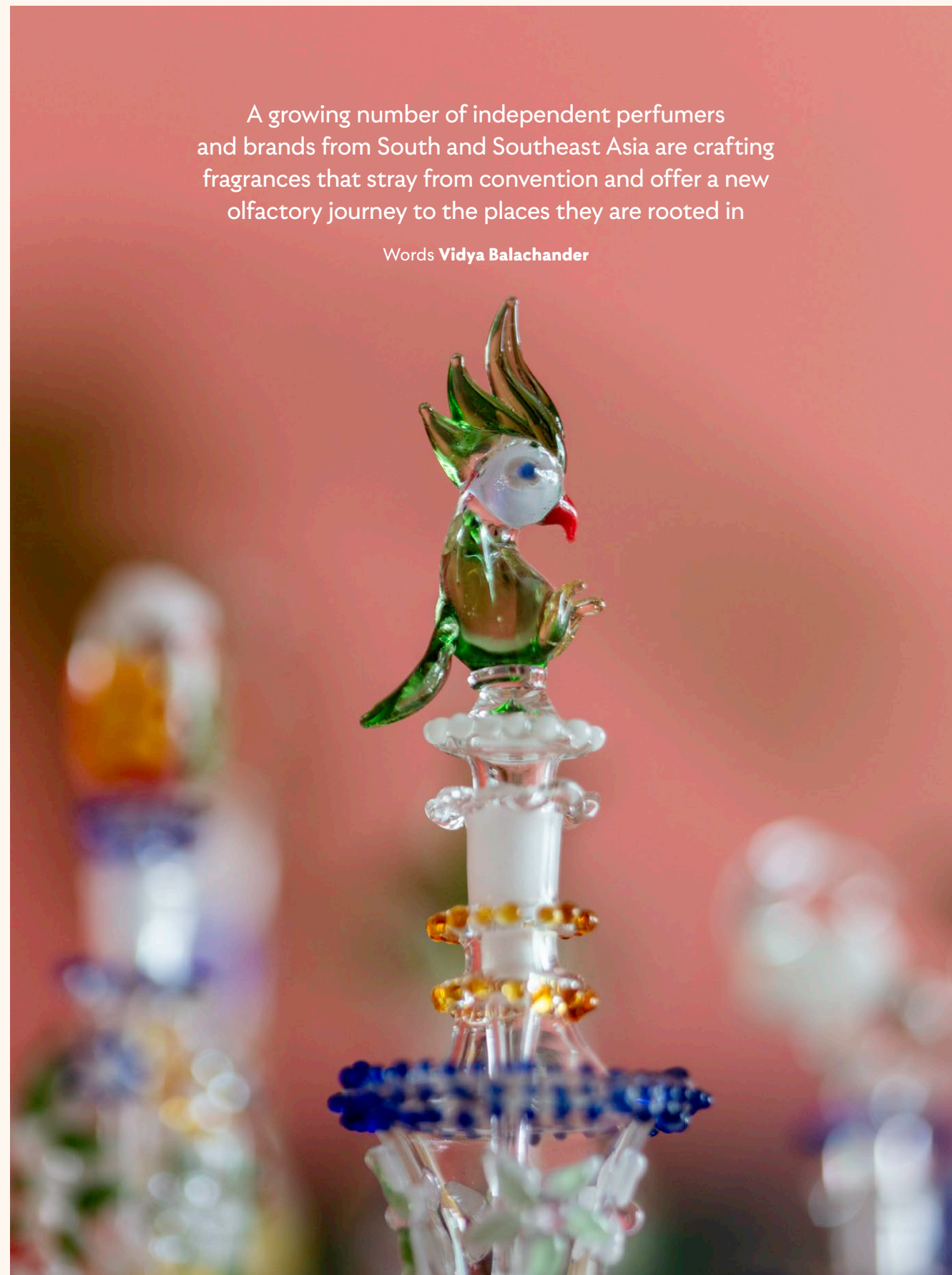
# a fragrant

# path

IMAGES: TARIQ KHAN (LEFT), PANKAJ ANAND (RIGHT)

A growing number of independent perfumers and brands from South and Southeast Asia are crafting fragrances that stray from convention and offer a new olfactory journey to the places they are rooted in

Words **Vidya Balachander**





# In the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, there is a town called Kannauj, known for producing attar or perfume oils.

Although I was born and raised in India, I have never visited Kannauj. But it has existed in my olfactory imagination for years. The town is also known for producing *mitti attar* or the distilled essence of petrichor, the smell of the first rain on parched earth.

My memory of petrichor goes back to the years I spent in the arid heartland of north India. Embedded among my early childhood memories is the longing for rain that followed a long, blistering summer, and the euphoric relief when the smell of wet earth would rise from the ground after the first showers.

Unforgettable in its fleeting intensity, petrichor is better experienced than described. Sitting at my desk in Manila, the closest I can come to that specific scent that's burnished in my memory is by opening a small, glass bottle of Maati, an attar by Boond, a boutique, modern-day fragrance house from Kannauj.

Like most attars, Maati is sold in a small, no-frills glass flacon. I use the glass wand attached to the screw top to daub a few drops of the attar on my pulse points. Unlike modern

perfumes, which focus on sillage – or the perfume's ability to project and linger – attars drape themselves to the skin. Maati reveals itself in the hushed decibels of an intimate secret – a suggestion of earthiness, suspended in a heart of musky sandalwood. It isn't exactly how I remember petrichor to be, but it is transportive in its ability to evoke a specific time, place and season.

Boond is one of a growing number of independent perfumers and brands in South and Southeast Asia who are creating fragrances that are closely inspired by the ethos of those places. Reflective not just of terroir – or the specific soil and climatic conditions that influence their composition – but also of provenance or a more encompassing sense of place, these fragrances open a unique portal to global exploration.

**LET'S CONSIDER SALTED GREEN MANGO, ONE OF THE NICHE** fragrances created by Thai perfumer Prin Lomros under his brand Strangers Parfumerie, for instance. It opens with an intensely fruity note with a slightly acrid edge, like slices of semi-ripe mangoes sweating in the midday sun. As time wears on, the fragrance mellows into something sweeter and fruitier but with an unmistakable edge. I imagine a mobile vendor on the streets of Bangkok briskly slicing mangoes and dousing them with coarse salt, the sweet scent of the fruit wafting amidst the smoke and fumes of the city.

Some of Prin's other fragrances, produced under his labels PRIN and Parfum Prissana, also evoke the ethos of his native Thailand, in bold, unusual and even unsettling ways. Featuring

**Previous spread:** Perfume making at Boond; ornate glass bottles by Litrahb Perfumery. **This page, left to right:** Boond founder Varun Tandon with his father, Pravin Tandon, who works as the company's head of operations; the brand's packaging reflects its provenance; Boond headquarters in Kannauj; vials of attar

notes of tar, hay, ambergris (or deer musk), skunk musk and even burning tire, alongside more conventional elements like floral, fruity and gourmand notes, it's clear that Prin's perfumes are not meant for mass approval. Independent perfumers like him create space for perfumery to exist as an art beyond the Eurocentric values that largely define its contemporary existence.

Most modern perfumes can be linked to Grasse, the French city that has been synonymous with the craft since the 16th century. A town once renowned for its tanneries but notorious for the stench that they generated, Grasse spun its disadvantage into an enviable calling card. Dotted with flower fields that produce precious raw materials, along with the ideal terroir to harness their fragile essence, the city is thought to have perfected the techniques and processes that define the industry today. Most famous "noses" or experts who compose fragrances have acquired their training in Grasse, and it is where many of the world's leading luxury fragrance houses and large companies source their ingredients from.

IMAGES: TARIQ KHAN







**Clockwise from top:** Prin Lomros of Strangers Parfumerie; inspiration at Litrahb Parfumerie; Litrahb founder Bharti Lalwani; luxe packaging by Wren Atelier

However, the reality is that with perfumery being a highly lucrative and competitive industry, it is only a select few with means who have been able to gain access to Grasse. As a result, perfumery is considered a guarded world that perpetuates a code of exclusivity. Most famous noses working today are overwhelmingly of French or European ancestry, and while their artistry is beyond debate, it does open the thorny yet important question of gatekeeping and the space – or lack thereof – for diversity.

Bharti Lalwani, an art critic-turned-perfumer, founded Litrahb Parfumerie, an independent label focussed on natural fragrances based in Pune, India – a three-hour train ride from Mumbai – partly in response to this gatekeeping. “Art and academic institutions are built for public good yet their format of knowledge production does not lend itself easily to the public,” Bharti tells me. Looking to apply her critic’s eye to the aesthetics of a different – yet interconnected – discipline, she founded Litrahb Parfumerie in 2018.

The first fragrance project that she took on was expansive in its ambition but with an element of fun in its approach. “Bagh-e Hind” was a virtual art exhibition or what Bharti calls “an immersive garden oasis”, which allowed viewers to experience the sensory setting of paintings and poetry from the Mughal era through music, poetry, photographs and fragrance. Created in collaboration with academic scholar and horticulturist Dr Nicolas Roth, “Bagh-e Hind” offered a synesthetic immersion into the milieu of these paintings through specially crafted perfumes and edible perfumes. Each of the five chapters of the exhibition, dedicated to a flower, had an accompanying set that included a parfum, a flavoured tea, an edible perfume, a perfumed soap and objects that recreated or were reminiscent of the period.

According to Bharti, the objective of the project was to take the experience of history out of a distant museum setting and to

bring it to one’s fingertips (and taste buds), so to speak. “For our Narcissus chapter in ‘Bagh-e Hind’, I created the effect of ‘eating narcissus’ by beating into sugar trace amounts of saffron, tuberose and Jasminum grandiflorum extracts,” wrote Bharti. “I then dusted dried apricots with this perfumed sugar. The sensorial impact is such that one chews and tastes fruit but smells flowers! The idea is to access our history, our heritage, our gardens and our flowers, with a light-handed playfulness.”

**VARUN AND KRATI TANDON, THE SIBLINGS** who co-founded Boond in 2021, are also trying to reclaim history in their own way. Hailing from Kannauj, Krati says her family has always been involved in the attar trade. However, it was during the pandemic years that the siblings decided to make their foray into the business. “It was during this time that we saw the fragrances and perfumeries of our town in a new light,” Krati tells me. “We realised their unmatched beauty and the great heritage value they hold.”

The decision was also hastened by the body blow that the pandemic dealt to the industry that sustains Kannauj’s economy. “It was also during this time that we saw the artisans and perfumeries struggle first-hand and were worried that the pandemic could be the final blow to our indigenous art,” says Krati. “We wanted to try and help the artisans and to revive the ancient Kannauj art of perfume making.”

Kannauj has been associated with perfumery for over 400 years. The form of perfumery practised here even to this day is old school, both in its form and application. Unlike modern perfumes, which use a small percentage of fragrance concentrates (such as fragrance oils) diluted with alcohol as a solvent or base, attars are highly concentrated perfume oils that use sandalwood oil as a base.

Attar is painstakingly distilled using *deg-bhapka*, a traditional technique that involves steaming flowers, woods and resins in a copper still called the deg and collecting the condensation in a receiver called the bhapka. It is a resource- and time-intensive process, with an end-product contrary to the high-octane glamour of western perfumery.

But Krati says that their customers have been receptive to the idea of rediscovering the quiet gravitas of attar. “We’ve found that customers are eager to experience fragrances that are nostalgic and unique, and our

IMAGES: PANKAJ ANAND (TOP), MAVERICK ASIO (BOTTOM)



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**Today, more than ever, a fragrance does not need to be conventionally pleasing to find an audience. Why shouldn’t fragrances reflect the complex, layered reality of the places that they are rooted in?”**



**This page:**

Wren Atelier founder  
Renato Lopena Jr

fragrances are just that for an Indian audience,” said Krati. “Whether it is the celebratory Motiya (Jasmine) and Audh (Agarwood) or the nostalgic Maati, most Indian customers love or at the very least are curious about these since they’ve heard about them from their elders. For international customers, the fact that the fragrances are oil-based, sustainably made and alcohol-free are major draws.”

The burgeoning success of Boond, Litrahb and Prin are an indication that a growing number of consumers are ready to embrace an unconventional approach to perfume. This is a shot in the arm for independent perfumers looking to forge their identity in a competitive environment. Today, more than ever, a fragrance does not need to be conventionally pleasing to find an audience. Why shouldn’t fragrances reflect the complex, layered reality of the places that they are rooted in?

This question comes to mind when I meet Renato Lopena Jr, the perfumer behind Wren Atelier, a boutique perfume brand based in Manila, where I now live. In a market dominated by clean, fresh, largely inoffensive scents that Filipinos favour for the tropical weather, Renato is trying a different path. Having trained at the Grasse Institute of Perfumery after giving up on

his initial career path of becoming a chef, Renato’s creations are a bit like the Philippines itself – bold, occasionally challenging and greater than the sum of its parts. I try Hacienderos (Spanish for farm owner), a fragrance that Renato says is his “homage to Filipino landowners and farmers”. With a bright flourish of bergamot and lemon that belies a base of barnyard, hay and dirt, Renato says it is a “clean yet dirty” scent.

When he launched Hacienderos in 2021, Renato was wary about the reception. “The first batch of Hacienderos was just 50 pieces,” he told me. “It was very risky, and I didn’t know if it would hit or not. But it was sold out in a matter of five days.” That initial success propelled him to launch more scents as part of his private collection under Wren Atelier, including Banqueros, a marine fragrance underpinned by notes of seaweed and squid ink, and Cosa Nostra, my personal favourite, a smoky, leathery perfume with a strident note of gunpowder, which softens as it lingers on your skin.

They may not be meant for a quick spritz when you are running late for a meeting, but Wren Atelier’s perfumes offer pause when you have a moment to spare. At least in part, they tell the story of a complex culture with layers upon layers to peel back. It’s clear that Renato has many more stories to craft – he’s just getting started. “My target as a brand is to not really be conventional,” he says. “Here in the Philippines, we still love fresh fragrances because of the weather. But I want my brand to be artistic and niche.”



## A sensory voyage

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