

Berkeley Hills

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Living



Discovering a World of
Scents with Municipal
Treasure Mandy Aftel

Cover photo by
Gary Schatan



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A Municipal Treasure

Discovering a World of Scents with Mandy Aftel

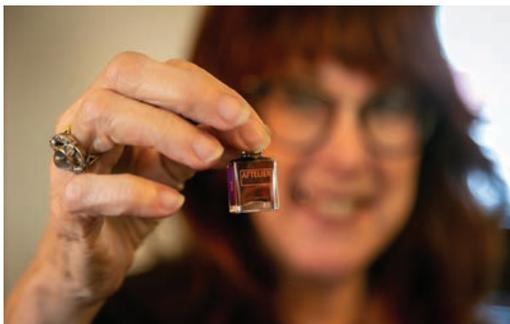
BY TOM DALZELL

WITH PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN STOREY

Mandy Aftel's career change from psychotherapist to natural perfumer decades ago is a pivot for the ages. Perhaps there was divine olfactory intervention; this has happened before, as reported in Exodus 30:34: "And the Lord said unto Moses, take unto thee sweet spices, stave, and onycha, and galbanum; these sweet spices with pure frankincense; of each shall there be a like weight."

Aftel came from Michigan to Berkeley in 1970. She bought her house on Walnut Street just south of Vine Street, where she practiced as a psychotherapist. Many of her patients were artists and writers. Almost 30 years ago she stopped working with the human psyche and started working with natural scents.

Today she is an icon in the world of perfumery and is often recognized as the pioneer of natural perfumery. She makes her perfumes in small batches in her home, using only pure and natural ingredients, without any added synthetics, parabens (parahydroxybenzoates or esters of parahydroxybenzoic acid that others use as preservatives), glycols (any of a class of organic compounds belonging to the alcohol family that others use as fixatives or stabilizers) or petrochemicals. She sells directly online, not through stores. She ships the product herself, out of a room in her house.



Mandy Aftel and husband Foster Curry. Together with their son, Devon Curry, they run the Archive of Curious Scents.

In the house and the museum behind the house, the absolute lack of clutter, despite the thousands of raw botanical ingredients, essential oils, and absolutes, is striking. The cabinets and drawers themselves are stunning – drawers from a Chinese apothecary, a typesetting cabinet, and a watchmaker's cabinet. One is reminded of Teodoro the pharmacist in Jorge Amado's "*Dona Flor e Seus Dois Maridos*" ("*Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands*") and his credo of a place for everything and everything in its place. There is a strong and confident hand at work here.

Aftel's attention to detail is exhaustive. The bottles, displays and paper with which shipped perfumes are wrapped (exquisite tissue paper imprinted with 19th-century images that took Aftel a year to compile and produce), and the cards that accompany the shipments are all perfect. One container option for her solid perfumes is an antique patch box, a small, usually rectangular, sometimes oval box used as a receptacle for beauty patches. During the reign of France's Louis XV in the 18th century, black patches of gummed taffeta were popular with fashionable women (and sometimes men) who wanted to emphasize the beauty or whiteness of their skin.

Behind her house, at 1518-1/2 Walnut, is her Archive of Curious Scents, an extraordinary museum of perfume and perfume history. It is only open on Saturdays, from 10 am to 6 pm, either by reservation or walk-in. Tickets are \$20 for a one-hour visit, \$12 for children under 18. Reservations may be made online at www.aftelier.com/Articles.asp?ID=256.

The single long room of the archive/museum could have stepped out of the pages of *Architectural Digest*. There are etchings, prints, a glorious "scent organ" with hundreds of scents, and a library of the history and art of perfumery.



Visitors to the museum learn that there are three components to a perfume. First are the top notes, also known as the opening notes or head notes. The top notes are generally the lightest of all the notes, recognized immediately and the first to fade because of their light molecular structure.

The top notes of a fragrance give the first impression and then transition to the heart of the fragrance. Common fragrance top notes include citrus (lemon, orange zest, bergamot), light fruits (grapefruit, berries) and herbs (clary sage, lavender).

After the top notes evaporate, the middle notes or heart notes, emerge. They provide the heart of the fragrance. They last longer than the more ephemeral top notes and have a strong influence on the base notes that will follow. They are often a combination of floral or fruit tones; sometimes infused with spices. Common fragrance middle notes include geranium, rose, lemongrass, ylang ylang, lavender, coriander, nutmeg, neroli and jasmine.

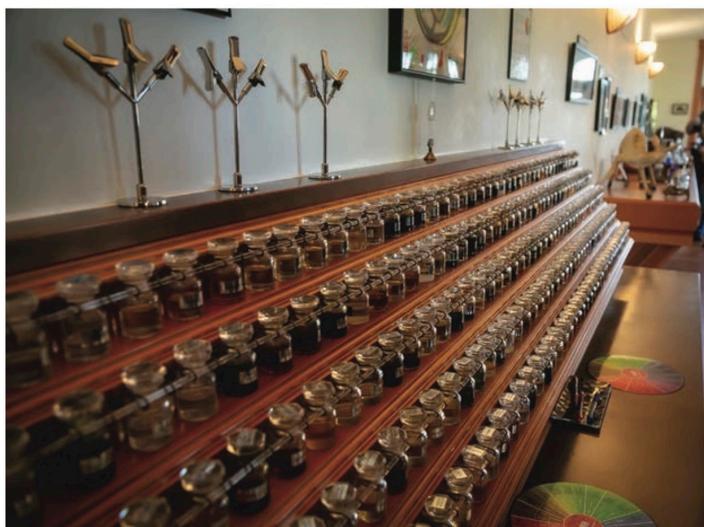
Last are the base notes, the final fragrance notes that appear once the top notes are completely evaporated. Base notes mingle with the heart notes to create the full body of the fragrance and they provide the lasting impression after the top notes have dissipated. Common base notes include cedarwood, sandalwood, vanilla, amber, patchouli, oakmoss and musk.

Museum guests are given three scent-testing strips and a piece of wool to cleanse their olfactory palate between samples. In the culinary world, a palate cleanser (*remise en bouche* in French, *intermezzo* in Italian) is a neutral-flavored food or drink that removes food residue from the tongue, allowing one to more accurately assess a new flavor. They are often used between tasting wine or cheese or other strong flavors, or between main dishes in cultures where diversity of flavors is valued.

With perfumes, coffee beans are often offered as an olfactory cleanser to combat olfactory habituation. The efficacy of this method doesn't withstand scientific scrutiny, and Aftel uses a strip of wool to cleanse the sense of smell and help prevent olfactory fatigue.



Copper chimes perfume maker
Photo by Lisa Carlson



In the museum we hear the terms “essential oil” or “absolute.” Essential oils are extracted through steam distillation. Absolutes are obtained through cold-solvent extraction using a solvent such as hexane or ethanol. Absolutes contain more of the aromatic detail of the original ingredient and the smell is closer to its “natural” form. This method is especially effective at capturing delicate scents, such as rose and jasmine.

Several times a year, Aftel offers a small class. Students complete a workbook before the class starts, and then attend the intense three-day in-studio instruction. See information on the classes at www.aftelier.com/category-s/1823.htm

Aftel has published several books, starting in 1982 with a biography of Brian Jones of the Rolling Stones. Her first scent-related book, *Essence and Alchemy*, was published in 2001. *Publisher's Weekly* called the book a “most extraordinary treatise on the history and making of perfume” and praised Aftel’s “sheer delight” in the material and her “irreverent sensibility.” Later works include *Scents & Sensibilities: Creating Solid Perfumes for Well-Being* (2005) and *Fragrant: The Secret Life of Scent* (2014).

She has taken her work into the culinary world, not surprising, if only because right over the western fence of her garden is Chez Panisse and the office where Alice Waters works. She has worked with chefs, mixologists, producers of fine chocolate, ice cream, candies and baked goods and was a pioneer in the use of essential oils in cooking.

In 2004, Aftel co-authored with Daniel Patterson (an American chef, restaurateur, and food writer, and a leading proponent of California cuisine) a cookbook called *Aroma: The Magic of Essential Oils in Foods*



and *Fragrance*. In its review of the book, *The New York Times* called it perhaps “the only current American cookbook featuring recipes for both meals and baths” – saying despite their disparate backgrounds, the two authors “connect in their longing to marry scent and taste.”

Aftel and her perfumes are a municipal treasure. The passion, devotion and curiosity she exhibits are rare and inspiring. Berkeley owes Detroit big thanks for giving us their daughter.



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