

*“It is how you live your life –
whether you are just
relentlessly acquiring, or if
you are making a soulful
connection to what you buy,
what you take in, and what
you work with.”*
Mandy Aftel



Mandy Aftel is an internationally-known artisan perfumer, educator, and author on natural fragrance and flavor. As the founder of Aftelier Perfumes, she has been hailed as one of the fragrance industry’s “most prolific talents” by Vogue and an “angel of alchemy” by Vanity Fair, and listed as one of the top seven bespoke perfumers in the world by Forbes. She is a founding advisor of The Institute for Art and Olfaction, which has created the Aftel Award for Handmade Perfume in her honor. She has been covered by the [NY Times](#) (The World's Most Dedicated Natural Perfumer), [Forbes](#) (Startup Stories - Why Doing Something You Love Is A Great Business Plan), [NYT Style-Singapore](#) (Person to Know: A Historian and Archivist of Scent), [Perfumer & Flavorist](#) (The Juice: Mandy Aftel – Changing the Perfume Game), and [Fragrantica](#) (Rich and Tangled History: Perfumer and Author Mandy Aftel).

Aftel is the author of eight books, including *The Art of Flavor: Practices and Principles for Creating Delicious Food*. (Riverhead Books, 2017, with 3-Michelin-star chef Daniel Patterson), *Fragrant: The Secret Life of Scent* (Riverhead Books, 2014, Perfume Plume award for writing), *Essence and Alchemy: A Natural History of Perfume* (FSG, 2001, 9 foreign editions, Richard B. Solomon Award from The Sense of Smell Institute), *Scents and Sensibilities: Creating Solid Perfumes for Well-Being* (Gibbs Smith, 2005), and *Aroma: The Magic of Essential Oils in Food and Fragrance* (Artisan Books, 2004, with 3-Michelin-star chef Daniel Patterson)

In 2017, she created the Aftel Archive of Curious Scents in Berkeley, California -- the only museum in the world dedicated to the history and experience of natural fragrance, showcasing her collection of one-of-a-kind-antique artifacts. It has received thousands of visitors and has been covered in [NYT Style](#), [Goop](#), [Vogue](#), [San Francisco Chronicle](#), [Smarter Travel](#) (Trip Advisor – video), Oprah, Art News, and Sunset, among others.

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Mandy Aftel Interview

Mandy's passion for natural essences is evidenced by her exquisite fragrances, bestselling books, and classes. She only puts out what she believes in and has been implementing sustainable practices for decades.

I had the great fortune to interview Mandy, an Airmid Institute member who takes sustainability seriously. Mandy's model is - small quantities, careful sourcing, thoughtfully prepared products, and building relationships with suppliers. Here is what I learned from this remarkable woman.

What prompted Mandy to explore natural perfumery?

Mandy is not a person in life who has plans, so has fallen into most things in life, and when she likes something, she falls in very deep. She was a psychotherapist for artisans for 30 years and planned to write a novel about narrative in people's lives. She would write a novel and make her main character a perfumer, so she began to collect old perfume books from the turn of the century because she knew she wanted to work with naturals and natural ingredients. She found these old books interesting and charming and then took an aromatherapy class with a friend to make solid perfume which led to co-starting a perfume line which was the first natural perfume line in America called Grandiflorum.

Mandy moved on from Grandiflorum - by then, she had created a niche for herself making custom perfume. During this time, she had collected a lot of oils and books to work with and to reference. People loved her perfumes and were asking for them. Her editor from her last psychology book said to write a book on natural perfumery - so then she wrote *Essence and Alchemy: A Natural History of Perfume*. That was 20 years ago. Her love for essences carried over into the culinary world where she and Michelin three-star chef Daniel Patterson authored *Aroma: The Magic of Essential Oils in Food and Fragrance*.

What has 30 years as a natural perfumer taught Mandy about plant sustainability?

1. Celebrate old essences

Mandy loves the plants. She loves everything about what yields the essences, and their history and history with us across the globe, time and cultures; it feels like an integral part of being human. When she started out, Mysore sandalwood* was not in trouble, not expensive, and easy to get. Over the years, many things became more depleted, resulting in sustainability issues.

She buys a lot of old essences and always has. She has an extremely large amount of 100-year-old sandalwood. Her connection to used and old materials is strong, and when she first found older essences, she was told they would be terrible and to throw them out - not true. When she consulted a large group of people from a company using naturals and synthetics, in return, they gave her many essences which were out-of-date, and which were fabulous. Mandy knows they get better with time, so she is always on the lookout for materials people don't want.

*Mysore sandalwood is a trademarked perfume oil extracted from a variety of *Sanlitalum album* in the Mysore district of Karnataka, India.

2. Have less, buy better

Mandy thinks about the oils and kind of everything she does. This comes from the way she is - she does not like waste, anything around she is not using, and would rather have less and buy better. There is a meaningful connection between Mandy and what she buys, and what she uses is central to the beauty of the process, so she is careful and picky about what she gets.

She recently bought sandalwood CO₂ extract to use as a top note in a perfume, which differs from sandalwood essential oil, which is a base - the CO₂ extract comes forward more in a blend and does not disappear like the oil will. If you're using something expensive and bury it in formula, that is not good - it can't be found. If using expensive or rare material, the idea is to set it up as a jewel or the perfume has failed.

She believes in buying and making things that are meaningful. Reckless consumption on many levels is just not in harmony with a kind of beautiful experience in your life. She wants to encourage people to think about this. This is a much wider way of thinking about sustainability – which is true for her.

3. Education

Mandy teaches her students to be comfortable spending money on exquisite materials, and to cherish them inside the formulas they create. And although she does believe in using more materials for making and remaking formulas, she works in drops which is why it is important to know the difference between three vs. four drops. Where to reduce waste is through learning and paying attention, and finding the best evocation of the idea you're expressing. And in her teaching, the way she works, is that she feels everything in a formula is doing the job in creating that perfume – like a story or poem, everything in there is considered and working toward the final aesthetic outcome. Every time you add something new, you have a better chance of losing control. Natural essences are so complex on their own, with each one made up of hundreds of different aroma molecules.

So when combining these complex beauties, simple is better and really knowing aroma facets of the materials you are using is so important. She further encourages people to deeply know and deeply work with what they have and understand the basics of constructions.

4. Work in small quantities

Mandy has always worked in small quantities - she works in drops because she likes the connection you have going drop by drop - this is why she doesn't use a scale. She likes the relationship to the materials by touching and seeing them – this is a more artisanal way to work. The artisanal process is not suited for big business - it is small. You can buy materials in small amounts because they will last in many bottles. Respect the materials; you don't need to buy giant amounts of things because they won't get through them at 30-40 drops/ml. Everything of hers is not there forever, including perfumes.

5. Ways to spend money

You can be mindful of money and resources when working by not overbuying. Mandy talks a lot about good and bad ways to waste money – the bad way is to overbuy and overspend – e.g. to buy thousands of bottles you're never going to use. On the note of all those statistics of the incredible amount of essential oils being used, it is not artisanal natural perfumery depleting those resources. She sees that people are buying hundreds of kilos of things such as essential oils from MLMs as opposed to her buying broom (*Spartium junceum*) for 8k /kilo which would last her probably five years. There are not many other people doing that.

6. Threatened species

Mandy recognizes materials are limited and she stops selling stuff if there is a problem with it.

7. Materials

Mandy has used material from fallen trees including bioabsolutes. She doesn't use anything fermented or from biotech – she is only interested in things that come from plants. She has not purchased many animal fixatives but does use them. The majority of her animal fixatives have come to her through stashes she has bought from other people. She has gotten, for example, hyraceum which is very recycled, and she makes onycha from shells. She was also gifted ambergris for her museum.

8. Reusable packaging, supplies and eco-conscious packaging

Mandy has been practicing 30 years of eco-conscious packaging - she was well ahead of her time! She thinks ideas and attitudes around sustainability are important. She uses glassine envelopes from sustainably managed forests, and very minimal packaging. She uses things that have value for people that get them and won't be wasted. Even samples are valued at a cost, and if sending a full-sized bottle of perfume for publicity, she asks that it be returned.

When she started 30 years ago, she had silver solid perfume cases made by a man in Mexico. People could use those cases and send them back for refills. She then collected antique cases, whereby people would buy them and return them for refills. When cases are returned – they are like old friends of Mandy's. They are special because they become a part of their memory and life, a very rich experience and attachment for people – a great way of being in people's lives. The cases also come in silk bags made by disabled people in Vietnam.

9. Museum (Aftel Archive of Curious Scents)

Mandy's museum provides a unique education on naturals through a hands-on exploration of aromatics, and it is done so respectfully of the materials. For example, 'using less' is practiced in the museum itself where the amount of essence placed on a test strip is controlled and encouraged not to use any extra

It is a special place that is home to many rescued specialities. For example, it houses a papier-mâché musk deer and beaver, a wooden whale, 100-year-old ambergris pieces, one of the earliest old ambergris oils, two apothecary cupboards of materials such as frankincense (*Boswellia* spp.), palo santo (*Bursera graveolens*), Makrut lime (*Citrus hystrix*) leaf, catalogs, maps, hundreds of historical texts, drinks and food with essential oil and recipe books, whole trays of unopened bottles, modern and old oils, a deconstruction of rose, and "smell me bottles".

Understanding that conservation efforts should always implement ways in which one can reconnect to, and learn about Nature, is a key step in creating a more permanent way of valuing Nature, and thus fueling the desire to protect it. If you have a chance, please visit the museum, also referred to as - a magical world; you won't be disappointed!

Airmid Institute thanks Mandy for her time sharing with us, and for all the wonderful work she does which embodies beauty in its most natural form, and which helps to protect many fragile species.



Aftel Archive of Curious Scents ©Mandy Aftel