

Perfume ON THE MENU

First came fragrant cocktails. Now, we're seeing a mouthwatering trend for scented suppers – a trail blazed in London by Pratap Chahal, a.k.a. That Hungry Chef, who was originally inspired by Mandy Aftel's book *Fragrant*. We brought the two of them together – and blew some bloggers' minds... By **Jo Fairley**

If you've never enjoyed a vetiver-smoked chocolate mini-tartlet, frankly, you haven't lived. But don't just take my word for that. Because The Perfume Society invited a group of esteemed writer and blogger contributors to *The Scented Letter* – many of them multi-Jasmine Award-winning, including The Candy Perfume Boy, Red's Kim Parker, Viola Levy and Vicci Bentley, of *How to Spend It* – for a dinner with a difference. One that we believe points the compass in a whole new culinary direction.

Now, as perfume journalists, we've all spritzed till we've dropped. Smelled everything from beaver gland secretions through to the scent of rare orchids captured via Headspace technology in the remote jungles of Costa Rica. It would be unfair to describe the assembled company on that November night as 'cynical' – but it takes a lot truly to knock our socks off. Yet that's exactly the feat pulled off by Pratap Chahal on that evening.

Our VIPs have been booking spaces at Pratap's suppers for some time, enjoyed in the spacious dining room of the North London home he shares with his wife (and invaluable right hand) Nikhat. These suppers are akin to a gourmet chain letter; you tend to go once, then book to return with all your mates – because his

Scented Supper Menu

A Passage to India Cocktail:
Gin, tonic, cumin, pepper,
mint & lemon

Spiced bread
and perfumed stories

Beetroot scented with rose and
bergamot, magnolia mustard,
orange, ricotta, pistachio

Sirloin of beef à l'Aftel,
patchouli and carrot pearl barley,
labdanum, pickled onions,
celeriac purée

Frankincense cream,
cedarwood-scented pear and
plum gel, apple and
chickpea crumble

Chocolate tartlet scented with
vetiver, jasmine and
sandalwood with wisps of
South Indian vetiver

cooking's quite simply exceptional.

Having worked his way through the kitchens of Cinnamon Club, The Orrery and Gordon Ramsay Claridge's, Indian-born Pratap (who also has a BA in English Literature) then helped open the Greenberry Café in Primrose Hill, earning rave reviews from the *Evening Standard* and *Time Out*.

But chef-ing and a home life are notoriously incompatible. 'After Nik and I got married, we decided to do something together – mainly so that I could leave behind 100-hour working weeks and actually spend time with her.' The idea of opening up their own home for 'pop-up' dining experiences came while they were relaxing on honeymoon in Mozambique. And after reading the works of Mandy Aftel, Pratap had the idea of putting together scented suppers.

To perfume-lovers around the world, Mandy Aftel is a woman with serious cred: the world's foremost natural perfumer, entirely self-trained, author of rock biographies (including one of The Rolling Stones' Brian Jones), and a former psychotherapist. Her home in Berkeley, California, shares a back fence with that of Alice Waters' renowned Chez Panisse restaurant. (Coincidentally, Mandy has been described as 'the Alice Waters of American natural perfume.') Scan



Mandy Aftel in her studio

the bookshelf of almost any serious perfumista and you'll almost certainly come across a copy of Mandy's book *Essence & Alchemy* – a practical guide to natural perfumery from the woman who is unquestionably world leader in that field. It also happens to be one of the most fascinating books we've ever read on perfume history.

Her subsequent book *Aroma* came about after a friend introduced Mandy to fellow San Francisco resident Daniel Patterson. By way of introduction she took some of her food essences for him to smell. Their resulting collaborative cookbook takes the idea

“
*To perfume-
 lovers around the
 world, Mandy
 Aftel a woman
 with serious cred*
 ”

of flavour and fragrance in food to palate-exalting levels, with recipes for Mixed Chicory Salad with Balsamic Black Truffle Vinaigrette, Spiced Hot Chocolate, and Sea Bass with Rosewater Beurre Blanc and Porcini. (The stains on the pages of my edition are partly splashes from ingredients and partly drool, I can tell you.)

‘I stumbled into the world of using essential oils for flavour without a plan,’ explains the author-perfumer. ‘Literally by following my nose. Most of what I’ve done in my life has grown out of curiosity and a deep desire to learn about the world around

Below: a selection of Mandy's Chef's Essences. Right: one of Pratap's stunning desserts



Scented cocktails (above left, and right) kick off the suppers. Pratap prepares dishes like the starter (above) and fish course (below) in his tiny galley kitchen



me.' Mandy's most recent book *Fragrant*, meanwhile, was winner of The Perfumed Plume Book of the Year 2016, the US-based independent literary award for fragrance writers. Looking in depth at five different scented ingredients (frankincense, cinnamon, jasmine, ambergris and peppermint), it was this volume which kickstarted Pratap's fascination with accentuating the aroma of foods.

'I was fascinated that Middle Eastern cultures would use frankincense in cooking,' Pratap says. 'And coupled with the fact we use ingredients like sandalwood and screw pine in India, I wanted to explore more. In addition, Mandy describes using scents in food – especially her famous Beef with Chocolate and Tobacco – so this was a completely new and exciting realm for me to dive into. I started experimenting with all the oils I could find to see which tasted good – and it just took off from there.' (For general Health & Safety advice, do see our box USING NATURAL ESSENCES SAFELY. We also recommend only following tried-and-trusted recipes like those from Mandy's books, or experimenting with specific commercial sprays and essences that have been approved for safe use.)

Pratap began, he explains, by using the scents to marinate meat, flavour vegetable purées and with sweetened milk. 'The challenge was to understand the right dose; for the first few weeks, our house just smelt of every scent possible, and quite often the food trials were so highly-scented, it was disastrously intense. The trick is to find a balance whereby you can still taste the scent – but not so strongly that in a five-course meal, it'll overwhelm everything else.' Echoing perfumery, some flavours take longer than others to emerge – in this case, on the tongue – while other 'top notes' are more short-lived.

Last summer, Pratap and Nik headed California-wards – and met up with Mandy Aftel (and her partner/husband Foster Currie) at Mandy's airy perfume studio. When Mandy

'This is probably my most popular recipe in *Aroma*,' notes Mandy. 'Neroli – orange flower essential oil – has a flavour and aroma that is far more exciting than orange flower water, although its uses are more limited. Here the fragrant neroli, juxtaposed with the familiarity of the cool, creamy custard, makes an exciting combination.'

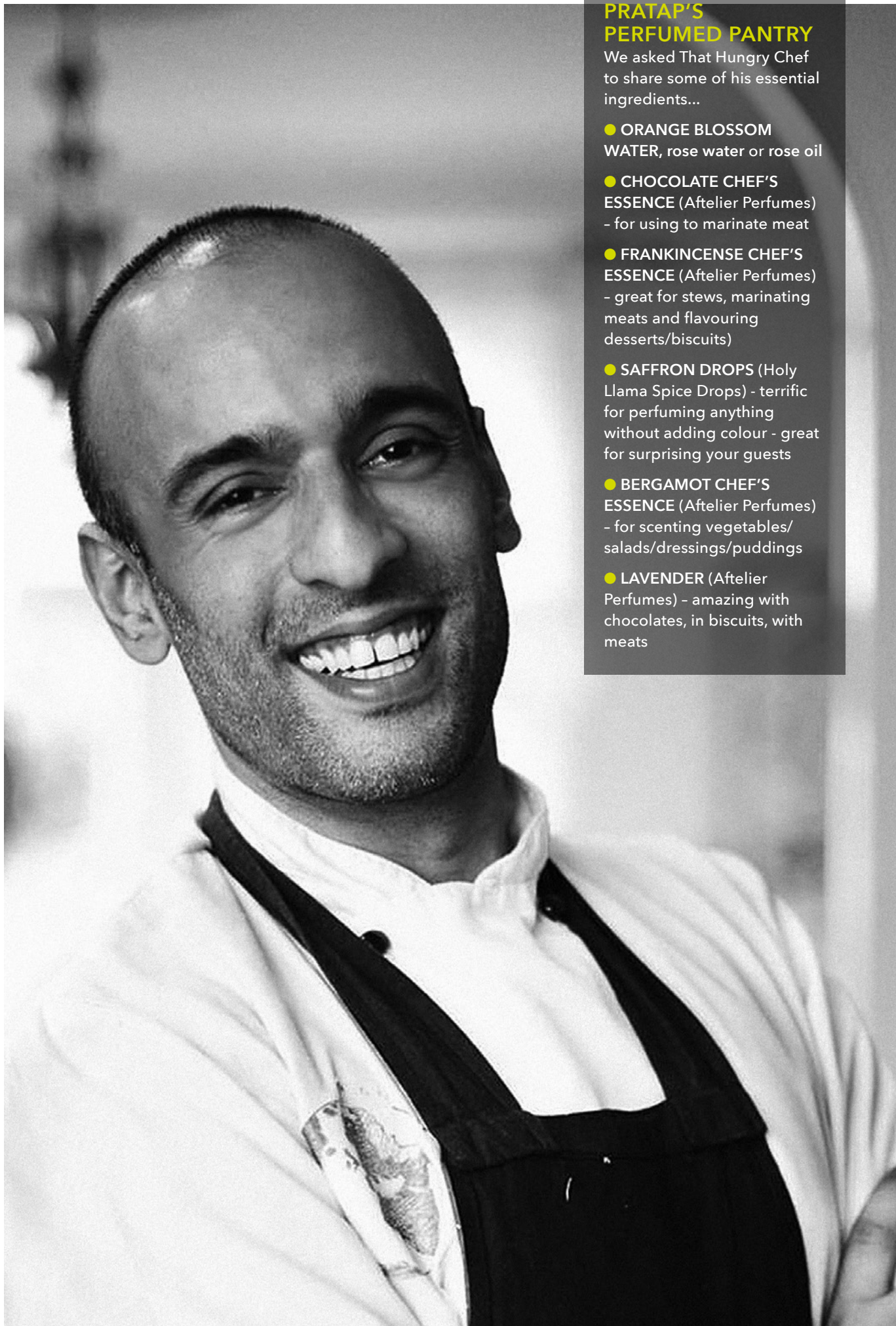
The custards will set considerably as they cook so be careful not to overcook them; keeping the oven temperature low will help give you a longer window in which to ensure they are perfectly set. For this recipe, you'll need eight ramekins (or heat-proof cups of similar sizes).

5 large eggs
2 large egg yolks
170g sugar
240ml whole milk
480ml double cream
1 cup fresh orange juice
8 drops neroli essential oil
Salt

- Pre-heat the oven to 275 degrees.
- In a mixing bowl, whisk the eggs
- and yolks with the sugar until just
- combined. Bring the milk and
- cream to just below a boil, cool
- slightly, and then whisk into the
- eggs. Add the orange juice, neroli
- oil and a pinch of salt. Strain the
- mixture through a fine mesh sieve,
- and skim any foam that may float
- to the top.
-
- Pour equal amounts of custard
- mixture into eight heat-proof
- ceramic cups. Place the cups in
- a large roasting pan, transfer to
- the oven and then, using a jug, fill
- the pan with hot water to about
- half-way up the sides of the cups.
- Cover the top of the pan with
- aluminium foil. Bake for 30 to 45
- minutes (or until the custards are
- set around the edges but jiggle
- slowly in the centre when lightly
- shaken). They will continue to set
- as they cool down, so they should
- be a bit loose. Remove the foil
- and cool at room temperature for
- 10 minutes, then refrigerate.

told us not long afterwards that she was planning a London visit, this seemed an unmissable opportunity to have Pratap cook for his culinary hero – and thus it came to pass that we assembled a group of esteemed perfume writers to experience this fascinating approach to food for themselves, with Pratap preparing a five-course feast in a kitchen smaller than many a ship's galley. (See previous page for menu). As The Candy Perfume Boy told us afterwards, 'I haven't stopped raving about the food to anyone who will listen since!' To quote Vicci Bentley, 'The memory of patchouli celeriac purée will be savoured for a very

“
The trick is to find a balance whereby you can still taste the scent – but not so strongly that in a five-course meal, it'll overwhelm everything else
”



PRATAP'S PERFUMED PANTRY

We asked That Hungry Chef to share some of his essential ingredients...

● **ORANGE BLOSSOM**
WATER, rose water or rose oil

● **CHOCOLATE CHEF'S**
ESSENCE (Aftelier Perfumes)
- for using to marinate meat

● **FRANKINCENSE CHEF'S**
ESSENCE (Aftelier Perfumes)
- great for stews, marinating
meats and flavouring
desserts/biscuits)

● **SAFFRON DROPS** (Holy
Llama Spice Drops) - terrific
for perfuming anything
without adding colour - great
for surprising your guests

● **BERGAMOT CHEF'S**
ESSENCE (Aftelier Perfumes)
- for scenting vegetables/
salads/dressings/puddings

● **LAVENDER** (Aftelier
Perfumes) - amazing with
chocolates, in biscuits, with
meats

long time to come!’ And as Mandy herself commented: ‘The evening was absolutely magical...’

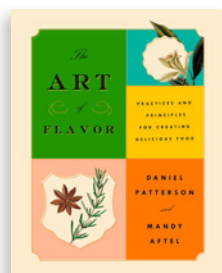
For me, the ultimate treat was the theatrical finale, when Pratap appeared brandishing a domed metal dish from which wisps of vetiver smoke seeped through holes. (The vetiver was brought back by Pratap from a visit to India.) We breathed that smoke. The vetiver-infused chocolate, with its woody-grassy notes, melted on the tongue. And it was a quintessential example of this new direction in cooking.

For anyone who hasn’t yet experienced the turbo-charging of aroma in food via perfumed ingredients, it’s almost an out-of-body experience. Half the time, your brain’s so confused it doesn’t know whether it’s tasting or smelling – and the sheer concentration of focusing on each mouthful, in an effort to deconstruct the magic of what’s going on in your mouth, means that every last morsel is languidly savoured. And if you can’t make it to one of Pratap’s scented suppers in North London, we’re delighted to share the resources here to ramp up the aromas in your own cuisine – which promise to change how you smell, taste and think about food.

Bon appetit. 🍴

To book a Scented Supper with Pratap Chahal in the company of fellow perfume-lovers, visit the **EVENTS** section of perfumesociety.org where we regularly list special dinners he puts on for our VIPs and guests. Check out his own website, thathungrychef.com, for other dining experiences.

Autumn 2017 sees the publication of Mandy Aftel’s long-awaited follow-up to *Aroma* – co-written once more with Daniel Patterson. *The Art of Flavor*. This book sets out to help us master the rules for creating flavour, featuring a unique ‘compass’ that points the way to combinations of aromatic ingredients for maximum effect. It can be pre-ordered on Amazon now.



USING NATURAL ESSENCES - SAFELY

As Mandy explains in *Aroma*, ‘Essential oils contain the most intense concentration of the plant they are extracted from, and so should be used carefully.’ All of the essences she recommends in her book for cooking with are not only FDA approved but have relatively low toxicity. ‘Used appropriately, all of them are completely safe,’ she says, with the caveat: ‘It’s important to follow a few guidelines.’

- Use only the amounts specified in the recipes, usually a few drops, or at the most a fraction of a teaspoon.
- Use only pure and natural essences, not synthetic, in the making of food and fragrance. (To which we would add: however curious you are about how your No.5 might taste swirled into whipped cream, this is not a good idea.)
- Do not drink the essences straight from the bottle.
- Always store the essences in a locked cabinet or drawer where small children cannot get hold of them.
- If you are allergic to an ingredient, do not ingest an essence derived from that ingredient. If you have tried an ingredient before and are not sure if you are allergic to it, do NOT use the essence derived from that ingredient until a doctor or other expert has determined whether or not you are indeed allergic to that ingredient.

“
For anyone
who hasn’t yet
experienced the
turbo-charging
of aroma in food
with perfumed
ingredients, it’s
almost an out-of-
body experience
”

TIME TO DITCH THE SPICE RACK?

Most of us have an arsenal of herbs and spices to add excitement to our cooking – but as Mandy explains, her Chef’s Essences and Sprays ‘outlive their traditional pantry counterparts and deliver a cleaner flavour.’ She supplies them to award-winning restaurants including Blue Hill, Nobu and The French Laundry. Use them in savoury dishes, baking and cocktails. Just a tiny amount is all that’s required. ‘Measure a drop or two carefully into a spoon so you can count each drop, as one extra can be too many’, she advises. Aftelier Perfumes Chef’s Essences come in 50 different flavours/aromas from Sweet Basil to Clary Sage via Fir Absolute, Cepes, Lavender, Magnolia Flower, Ylang Ylang, Petitgrain and more, from \$12 (and up and up). 27 Chef’s Essence Sprays are also available, for misting on a dish – anything from soups to ice cream – and include Ginger, Galangal, Cardamom, Mandarin, etc. For inspiration and to order (they can be shipped internationally), visit aftelier.com.