

Little Vaara in a Bottle

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New Delhi : In today's bespoke-loving times, a little money can take you far. But here's a story that only befits a princess. Little Vaara, daughter to Yuvraj Shivraj Singh and granddaughter to Maharaja Gaj Singh II of Jodhpur, is not yet two. And yet English perfume house Penhaligon's has brought out a fragrance named after her and inspired by her hometown.

There have been perfumes that have found their muse in Indian cities before, like Guerlain's Shalimar and Boucheron's Jaipur. When Saul Fox, chairman of the American company Fox Paine (which owns Penhaligon's) visited Jodhpur for the first time, his passions were roused. He returned home to LA and phoned his colleague, Sarah Rotheram, the CEO of Penhaligon's, in London, telling her all about the Blue City. Fox and Rotheram then visited Jodhpur together and met Bapji, as the Maharaja is known. They said they wanted to bring out a fragrance inspired by Jodhpur, and Bapji christened it Vaara, after his newborn granddaughter.

Almost two years later, I meet the 'Vaara' team in Jodhpur, where it all began, and where it culminated into a very intimate launch. I meet Bertrand Duchaufour, arguably the highest profile perfumer in the world and the 'nose' behind this fragrance, at the Bal Samand Palace, one of Bapji's many hotel residences. The Bal Samand gardens are the birthing chamber of the Vaara fragrance, each flower used as an ingredient is to be found here.

Duchaufour is an absolute purist; in his 27-year career, he is credited with some blockbuster perfumes — Christian Dior's Fahrenheit, Fahrenheit Zero and Dune, and Givenchy's Amarige. As he takes me on an educative walk through the gardens, he says he wears no cologne as it "how do you zay eet?...interferes". His wife, Valerie, is a fragrance curator, and is helping him introduce the flora and its special scents to me. There is jasmine, the amazing buds of champaka, from the marigold family of Orissa, and frangipani "but without the sticky, heavy effect", says Duchaufour. There are rose and carrot seeds for tenderness, and saffron. "The rose and saffron combination is important to Indian and Middle Eastern perfumes, but I have translated these to a western perfume," Duchaufour adds.

I still don't see the bottle as yet. That is to be only after it is launched at the Mehrangarh Palace and Fort on the next night, the first night of the blessed Navratri season.

The perfume is first launched at the Maharaja's home with little Vaara around. Bapji later tells me she clutched the bottle when it was shown to her, and wouldn't let it go. "So she already loves it," he laughs.

A few hours later, several guests arrive at Mehrangarh. Chandler Burr, author and celebrated perfume critic, is here. The effervescent Shivranjani wears a beautiful, burgundy chiffon made by Hassan, the father of Padmashri Tayeb Khan (Tayeb is the inventor of the shaded leheriya and the royal family's favourite sari-dyer). Raghavendra Rathore and his wife Kavita are here, as is conservationist Abha Narain Lambah. Many are cousins, some are friends.

This, despite the splendour, is a personal story. I'm sharing my table with Rotheram, a Brit with great vim and wit. She shares many stories about Penhaligon's. It was launched in "smelly" London in 1870, right next to a Turkish hammam. Its first perfume was called the Hammam Bouquet, after the spa next door. Its Bluebell became the favourite of Diana, Princess of Wales. And how it has been dressing the Queen's boudoir for decades now. "Vaara

and Penhaligon's connection with Indian royalty feels just so right," she says. Besides, Bapji studied at Oxford, and England has been his home too.

Rotheram makes a strong case for niche perfumes, expensive as they are (Vaara will retail at 130 pounds for 100 ml). But I am already a believer, convinced duty-free schmuck is just that. Penhaligon's is also one of the few bastions upholding British manufacture. "Made in Britain is a stamp of quality," she avers. Rotheram and Duchaufour visited Jodhpur together several times. They discovered the city's smells together: of its mud, its hot summers, its scorching sun and the breeze that floats above the city through its jaali-ed fortress at Mehrangarh.

Just before dessert, she makes a speech and raises a toast. Vaara is then unveiled and each guest is presented with a hand-crafted English crystal bottle. Everyone opens their gift and rubs some on their wrist. It is such a sophisticated scent, a new facet opening up every few seconds. A male guest at my table says he would totally wear it too, although I find the fragrance a bit feminine.

The rose and saffron scents are strong, a hint of sweet carrot seeds is unmistakable. It lingers till the wee hours of the after-party. Which princess doesn't enjoy a party after all?