

'A Pocketful of Magic'

By Amber Ascroft

What does Soho smell like? Ciggies, Jägermeister and new-gen burger joints? Sweat from cyclists on courier bikes? On the small corner where Broadwick Street meets Lexington Street, the signature scent is different. Distinct. A world away from the rest of the area's asphalt maze. A glug of oozy cocoa here, a drop of praline there - all veiled with lashings of spice and amber.

That heady haze comes from the SAID dal 1923, an unassuming Italian café specialising in indulgent chocolate drinks. A Carnaby Street shop assistant might pop in occasionally, but the vast majority of the clientele is infinitely more refined. Think Middle-Eastern women who like their hot drinks rich, their wardrobes sumptuous and their perfumes ultra-decadent.

It's an olfactory snapshot of another realm - one that master perfumer Roja Dove, who's created bespoke blends for royalty, knows inside out. His fragrances, dressed with Swarovski crystals and silk pillows, are sold around the world, from Belgravia to Bahrain, commanding up to £45,000 a pop.

At the heart of Roja's fragrances and that elusive SAID dal scent cloud? Oud (or 'Aoud', to Roja): a word used to describe not just the ingredient, but the perfumes it stars in, too. The resin is produced when a special kind of tree (Aquilaria) catches a special kind of disease, hence the special kind of prices.

Some describe the smell as oriental, others say it's akin to tobacco or barnyards. Imagine leather swirled with honey and incense - you're a little closer. But it's not just its one-of-a-kind aroma that gives Oud its illustriousness.

I pull up a pew beside two women outside SAID dal 1923. Their fragrance fills the street-side space - an aura of über-luxe. During our impromptu chat, the girls explain they're visiting from Saudi Arabia, citing Christian Dior Oud Ispahan, £200, and Giorgio Armani Oud Royal, £195, as their fragrances of choice. With price tags a few zeros too short, designer blends like these are considered an 'ode to Oud' by some - not *quite* the real deal. Still, the girls know their stuff. But when I press them to tell me what's so extraordinary about Oud, their flawless brows narrow.

'It's difficult to put into words. There's nothing else like it here. It's different. It's precious,' comments Deena, 24, as she takes a scoop of her Affogato. 'It's ingrained in our culture. It's part of who we are,' tries Amal, 23.

Roja sheds more light: 'The greatest compliment I ever receive is when my clients from the Gulf ask, "How do you know our scent?" Aoud is steeped in history. It's part of the Middle East's DNA.'

While most Oud is worn as an oil (popular as it takes longer to evaporate in

the dry, desert atmosphere), miniscule pieces are also burnt over charcoals. Nestling inside wardrobes and dancing through living rooms, the plume permeates Arab life.

Beauty editor Laila Hamdaoui, who's spent 20 years working in the United Arab Emirates, tells me customisation is king. 'Women layer fragrances as a way of expressing themselves, particularly in a world of monochrome attire,' she comments.

Back in Soho, as I make my daily meander past SAID dal 1923, I wonder if the outside seating area is a shrewd marketing ploy. A scented signal that strikes you from five doors away - cost-free for the owners - announcing this coffee shop's fancier than most.

There must be pockets of scent like this all over the capital, gently distributing 'gorgeous' amongst the grey, like the echoes of a busker in a tunnel.

According to Daniele Quercia, a scientist at Nokia Bell Labs, Cambridge, specialising in urban computing and 'smellscapes', there are lots, but we're not using them to their full potential. 'In Japan, 100 sites have been declared as protected, because of their "good fragrance". In the UK, we found town planners concentrate on managing foul smells, but the positive go unnoticed,' Daniele tells me.

He's even working on an app that can capture fleeting aromas. 'There are maps that can share the most beautiful routes. This would allow us to create maps telling you the sweetest-smelling journeys,' he explains.

A delicious prospect, indeed. I know which route I'd take. Every time.