

Giving tree

Through First Nations ownership, a Western Australian company is harnessing sandalwood knowledge that goes back tens of thousands of years – and perfumers around the world are wanting in.

By Jonah Waterhouse.



“The plants and the animals know how to survive here ... We have that balance to look after the land and the land looks after us”



Clockwise from left: A sandalwood tree in the Gibson Desert; Clinton Farmer, co-owner Dutjahn Sandalwood Oils; products from Aesop and Australian perfumer St. Rose, which harness Dutjahn's sandalwood oils; Clinton smelling recently harvested dutjahn wood.

The warm, tempered aroma of sandalwood is unlike anything else in the fragrance world. As a base note of many perfumes – think Tom Ford’s Santal Blush, or Le Labo’s coveted Santal 33, a mainstay on vanities across the globe – its origins are less widely known than its smell.

For Clinton Farmer, an understanding of sandalwood goes deep. The 46-year-old Martu man was taught about the material by his father, the late Ken Farmer, who was raised on the isolated plains of the Gibson Desert in Western Australia. Like Ken, Clinton resides in the Gibson, at the Aboriginal community of Kutkabubba, around 900 kilometres north-east of Perth. There he leads local workers in harvesting sandalwood oil from trees for Dutjahn Sandalwood Oils, the company founded in 2017 that has operations on Native Title lands. Clinton and his cousin, Darren, make two among six owners of the 50 per cent Indigenous-led business, which supplies to some of the world’s largest beauty brands.

“[Sandalwood] has been used for generations and that knowledge has been passed down for generations, thousands of years,” Farmer says. Mentioning that its oil was used to bring calm and aid in decision-making among Elders, as well as for treating infections, he notes that its importance extends far beyond the top-note appeal of modern fragrance. “It’s a special plant ... like all plants and animals, we look after it and keep it special.”

Dutjahn is the Martu and Wongi word for the sandalwood tree, a resilient shrub that grows in arid areas across Australia. The world-famous oil is inside its branches and becomes more potent in hot and dry weather, which in the Gibson Desert is most of the year. Farmer explains that sandalwood trees are hemiparasites, meaning they derive moisture from other host trees through subterranean connections to survive the heat.

“The plants and the animals know how to survive here ... We have that balance to look after the land and the land looks after us,” he shares.

Even the humans who harvest sandalwood are part of that ecosystem. Farmer’s generational knowledge helps him assess how many trees have been farmed and from where, to ensure underground connections stay uninterrupted. Once finished, those harvesting Dutjahn plant 20 to 40 more seeds near the stronger host trees, and the cycle continues. In its essence, this way of farming is protecting the natural ecosystem and respecting the sandalwood tree as a sacred entity, as First Nations people have done for tens of thousands of years.

“The government says leave 10 per cent behind, but we leave 20, 30, 40 per cent behind,” Farmer explains. “It’s more successful here than anywhere else because it’s been part of our culture. We’re preserving, looking after ... [and] we’ve got the oldest trees in the world.”

It’s far more innovative than colonial farming methods, which strip the land and give it no ability to recover. Guy Vincent, the Australian CEO of Dutjahn Sandalwood Oils, formerly worked as a perfumer at Estée Lauder in the US before returning to Australia to take on the role in August 2020, and says it’s crucial for First Nations custodians to be on Country sharing guidance on farming methods.

“[When] I speak to someone like Clinton and say the country is healthy, the land is looking healthy and good, it’s because of human involvement,” Vincent posits. “Having people on Country and managing Country, especially now in the modern sense, post-colonisation where there’s been feral animals brought in, invasive species of weeds ... it’s really important to get people back on Country with Indigenous knowledge.”

Vincent notes that the bilby, the endangered marsupial affected by invasive species, has started to rebound in some areas. The company has also founded the K Farmer Dutjahn Foundation, a not-for-profit furthering knowledge, funding and research of sandalwood farming for future generations. Most prestigiously, in 2019 the UN awarded Dutjahn the Equator Prize: a global award that celebrates Indigenous inventions of natural solutions to curb the climate crisis. Benefits like these outweigh the financial value of sandalwood oil, but it will always be a premium commodity; Vincent says it’s “not the most expensive” ingredient, but the 10 to 15-year growth time of the sandalwood tree, and the effort it takes to distill it, culminates in a costlier product.

That’s certainly not hindering demand. Aesop and Aveda are among the large-scale companies that list Dutjahn as an official supplier for their products involving sandalwood. Dutjahn believes it’s likely fragrances by Calvin Klein and Tom Ford use sandalwood oil from their farms, due to Coty and Estée Lauder’s extensive employment of Australian oils. For Belinda Smith, founder of conscious fragrance brand St. Rose, it was a no-brainer to work with Dutjahn Sandalwood Oils. “The way they are supporting and incorporating the Martu people’s ancestral knowledge in how to sustainably harvest desert wood is simply unparalleled,” she says.

Interestingly, the sandalwood tree’s ability to benefit the land it sits on is mirrored by its olfactory effect. Vincent says that when used in perfume, the oil extracts and exaggerates other notes, making them more powerful. “For example, if you use a small amount in a pure rose composition, it can bring out the petally, beautiful, dewy aspects of rose and give it strength and composure,” he elaborates. “I like to say that sandalwood is fantastic because it’s a collaborator, a supporter, and beautiful in its own right.”



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VOGUE

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Meeting Marc Jacobs

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Zadie Smith

