

FOR GOOD RESIN

IN MUSCAT, FRANKINCENSE PERMEATES INTO EVERYTHING FROM THE COMMONPLACE TO THE UNLIKELY
BY SONAL SHAH



Muscat's Mutrah Souq is packed with big and small shops selling frankincense in all its forms from *oudh* wood incense to perfumes.

Oman smells like Christmas all year round. Walking in out of the hot sun—whether it's into a mosque, a hotel, or someone's home—means being engulfed by the pervasive plumes of frankincense smoke. It fills every interior space with a rich, piney fragrance, nuanced with hints of citrus peel; a cleansing perfume that is mellow and less medicinal than the camphor Indians are familiar with.

Frankincense recalls the Christian holiday season because it is the Roman Catholic Church's signature scent, burnt in the censers of this and various Orthodox faiths. Frankincense was also one of the three gifts brought to Jesus's cradle by the biblical Magi. At various points in history, this gummy, resinous extract from different *Boswellia* tree species has been more valuable than gold, one of the Wise Men's other gifts. Traditionally used as an aromatic, frankincense—*luban* in Arabic—can now be found in many places besides the incense burner.

Trygve Harris, an American expat who distils the resin for her line of essential oils **Enfleurage** (www.enfleurage.com), came up with the most inventive, and sugary, treatment of *luban*. She first began making and selling frankincense

ice cream in 2011. Though her company is only likely to start producing it for wider consumption next year, others have caught on.

In Muscat, **Ice Cream Mama** sells kulfi-like pops in typically Omani flavours, including *luban*, *laban* (a yogurt drink), *halwa*, *karak chai*, rose, and even Vimto (www.facebook.com/icecreammamaoman).

Frankincense ice cream is gooier than regular ice cream and tastes like frozen, candied pinecone

(www.alanghamoman.com). A more upscale version of frankincense ice cream is found at **Al Angham** restaurant at the Royal Opera. Reminiscent of its Greek and Turkish cousins—*kaimaki* and *dondurma*, which are made of mastic, a Mediterranean resin—frankincense ice cream is a little gooier than regular ice cream and tastes like licking a frozen, candied pinecone (www.alanghamoman.com).

Frankincense has historically been imbibed for good health. The substance and its extracts are believed to have

many curative properties: claims range from relieving arthritic pain to destroying cancer cells. At the very least, *luban*-infused water is extremely refreshing. At Mutrah Corniche's **Bait Al Luban**, an Omani restaurant that blends tradition with a light, contemporary touch, the water is steeped with the woody flavour, complementing the rich meat and rice dishes (www.baitalluban.com).

For people who prefer frankincense on them, not in them, there are many perfumes available. Amouage, one of the world's most expensive perfumiers, tops the list, with frankincense in most of its fragrances. At the **Amouage factory** in Al Mawaleh, visitors can take a quick tour behind the scenes before hitting the store (www.amouage.com).

In Oman, spas use frankincense too. For example, the frankincense and rose wrap at **Shangri-La Barr Al Jissah's CHI Spa** is a full-body incense experience (www.shangri-la.com).

But to stick to the basics, visit **Mutrah Souq**, which has both touristy shops, with packaged incense kits and *bakhoor* (chips of *oudh* wood soaked in oil and resin); and wholesale shops that sell gums and resins from gunnysacks. It's like buying Christmas by the kilo. 🌿