

Is Kannauj Attar Really Natural?



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Not by default. Kannauj has a few hundred working distilleries making natural attar, and its market is also full of synthetic blends sold to outsiders as natural, while online sellers far from the town use its name. The word Kannauj proves nothing about a bottle. The distillery, the botanical, the base oil and a GC-MS report on your batch do.

The Short Version

- A natural attar is a botanical distilled into a base oil. A synthetic "attar" is fragrance oil in a carrier.
- Kannauj residents say town shops sell synthetics to outsiders as natural, and online sellers borrow the name.
- The Kannauj Perfume GI protects the name in India, not the contents of one bottle.
- Ask for the distillery, the botanical, the base oil, the season and a GC-MS on your batch.
- A synthetic aroma chemical such as BMHCA in the GC-MS means the attar is not wholly natural, whatever the label says.

Some of it is, and the town name won't tell you which. Kannauj has a few hundred working distilleries that make attar the old way, by distilling flowers or herbs into a base oil, and the same market sells synthetic fragrance blends to outsiders as natural. Online sellers with no link to the town put "Kannauj" in their titles too. What tells you is the distillery, the base oil and a lab report on your batch.

A Kannauj resident said it plainly on a fragrance forum in 2025: "shops here will usually scam outsider by saying it's a genuine product but it won't be" ([r/DesiFragranceAddicts, February 2025](#)). In the same thread a foreign buyer vouched for a distillery he had visited in 2022 and found "of superior quality". Both are true, and that's the whole problem in two posts. This page

is about telling them apart. How the town works, the GI and the export route are on our [Kannauj cluster page](#), so I won't repeat them. The caveat - nobody has measured what share of attar sold as Kannauj is synthetic, and our evidence is mostly Indian buyers and residents, not export importers.

SourcingFrom Intelligence

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- 01 **"The market is flooded with synthetic ones."** Residents and buyers say synthetic attars are sold as natural in Kannauj, and that online sellers use the name freely. *(Our review of fragrance forum threads, 2024 to 2025)*
- 02 **The town's natural attar is small-batch and seasonal.** FFDC's director describes 350 to 400 distilleries, 23 of them focused on sandalwood oil, with rose and kewda oils among the most expensive things the town distils. *([Wimwian](#), [March 2026](#), read 18 October 2026)*
- 03 **A banned synthetic keeps turning up in Indian fragrance.** BMHCA (lilial) was involved in 32 of 62 EU safety alerts on Indian cosmetics since 2021, in perfumes, attars and body sprays among others. *(Our count of EU Safety Gate)*

What we don't know yet

- ☐ Which Kannauj firms are registered as authorised users of the GI. The registry page we read doesn't list them.

1. What Does "Natural" Mean on an Attar?

Start by separating three products that all get called attar.

- **A distilled attar on a traditional base.** Flowers or herbs are distilled in a copper deg, and the scented vapour is caught in a bhapka holding a base oil, traditionally sandalwood. This is the Kannauj method.

- **A distilled attar on another base.** The same process, with a cheaper oil in the receiver. Still natural, but a different product from the first, and it should be priced and labelled as one.
- **A fragrance oil sold as attar.** A blend of aroma chemicals, sometimes with some natural material, in a carrier oil. It can smell lovely and is a legitimate product when it's sold as what it is.

The first two are natural. The third isn't, and the complaints in our logs are almost all about the third being sold as the first. Notice that the base oil is part of the answer, not a detail. A rose attar on sandalwood and a rose attar on another base are not the same thing, even if both are distilled honestly.

2. Why Is the Market Full of Synthetics?

Economics and the seasons. The director of the government's fragrance centre in Kannauj told a visitor that rose and kewda oils are among the most expensive things the town distils, and that only a handful of rose varieties carry enough scent to distil at all ([Wimwian, March 2026](#)). The flowers come in season, and each still takes a small charge. A synthetic blend can be made any day, in any volume, and in our reading far more cheaply.

An outsider has no price anchor and no nose trained on the real thing, so the blend gets sold at a natural price. That's a pricing and labelling problem, not a reason to stay away. The distillers are real. The point is to buy from them rather than from whoever stands between you and them.

3. What Should You Ask a Kannauj Seller?

Five things, and a good distiller will answer all of them without fuss.

1. **Which distillery made this, and can we visit it?** If the seller isn't the distiller, that's normal, but you want the name.

2. **Which botanical, which base oil, and roughly what ratio?** "Rose attar" alone tells you nothing.
3. **Which season and batch?** Ask for the batch number on the bottle and the invoice.
4. **How much of this batch is there?** Natural attar comes in small, seasonal batches. In our reading, a seller offering every flower attar in large volumes all year round is worth a closer look, because that's not how the stills work.
5. **Will you share a GC-MS report on this batch, and accept my own test?**
The answer to the second half matters more than the first.

4. What Can a GC-MS Report Show?

A GC-MS separates a sample into its compounds and identifies them, so it's the main tool for telling a distilled attar from a fragrance-oil blend. It can show the markers you'd expect from the botanical and the base. For sandalwood, santalols are the compounds buyers look at. It can also show aroma chemicals that the botanical doesn't produce, and that's the clearest sign of a blend.

Two cautions. A report describes the sample tested, which may not be the bottle you get, so match the batch number and test your own sample from the lot at a lab you choose. And reading an attar's profile takes a trained eye, so ask your lab what its method can and can't tell apart. Kannauj itself has a NABL-accredited quality lab at the government fragrance centre, as the visit report notes.

5. Is There a Quick Red Flag?

There's one the regulators keep finding. BMHCA, also called lilial, is a synthetic aroma chemical that no flower produces, so if it shows up in a GC-

MS of a "natural" attar, the question is settled. It's also the substance behind half of the EU's safety alerts on Indian cosmetics, attars included, as our [Kannauj cluster page](#) sets out with the counts. So make it a named line in your lab test rather than relying on the seller's word. The per-batch allergen declaration and who files what are on the [cosmetics industry page](#).

6. What About the GI and the Online Sellers?

The GI is a name right inside India, not a test on any bottle, and what it does and doesn't prove is on the [cluster page](#). What matters here is its reach. It doesn't stop a seller abroad, or a listing on a global marketplace, from using the word, and forum users say online sellers borrow the town's name all the time ([r/DesiFragranceAddicts, 2024](#)). So the name tells you where to look for distillers, nothing more.

If you'd like someone to visit two or three distilleries for you, draw samples from the batch you'd buy and send them for GC-MS, [SourcingSync](#) does that work. For essential oils sold as ingredients rather than attars, see [is your Indian essential oil what the label says?](#)

Questions Buyers Ask

Can I smell the difference between a natural and a synthetic attar? ^

Experienced perfumers often can. Most buyers can't, especially after the fourth bottle. Use the lab.

Is a synthetic attar a bad product? v

Does the Kannauj GI mean the attar is natural? v

What base oil should I ask for?

