



# HEAVEN SCENT

## JEBEL AKHDAR ROSE HARVEST

Written and photographed by Tony Walsh

*Oman's distinctive amber-tinged rose water is produced using traditional technology and methods from roses grown in the Jebel Akhdar mountains*

Terraced fields cascade down

"Go on, take a look." The heat in the room was already intense and peering into the oven below me would simply make it searing. "Go on; the top's off." I thrust my face into the rush of heat. Somewhere in the dark pit below was a ring of pink, bright pink rose petals with a small bowl sitting on them. I quickly shrank back, Sulaiman smiled and dropped the top back on.

I had wandered into Sulaiman's cook house following the smell. Outside a trail of black soot wound its way up a wall; inside the room was a duotone of brown from the mud walls and black from years of smoke.

Roses are unexpected in Oman. In summer the temperature can reach over 50°C while in winter it hovers around 20°C. However, ascend a couple of kilometres into the Jebel Akhdar mountains and winter frosts can grip the air and the summer heat barely reaches

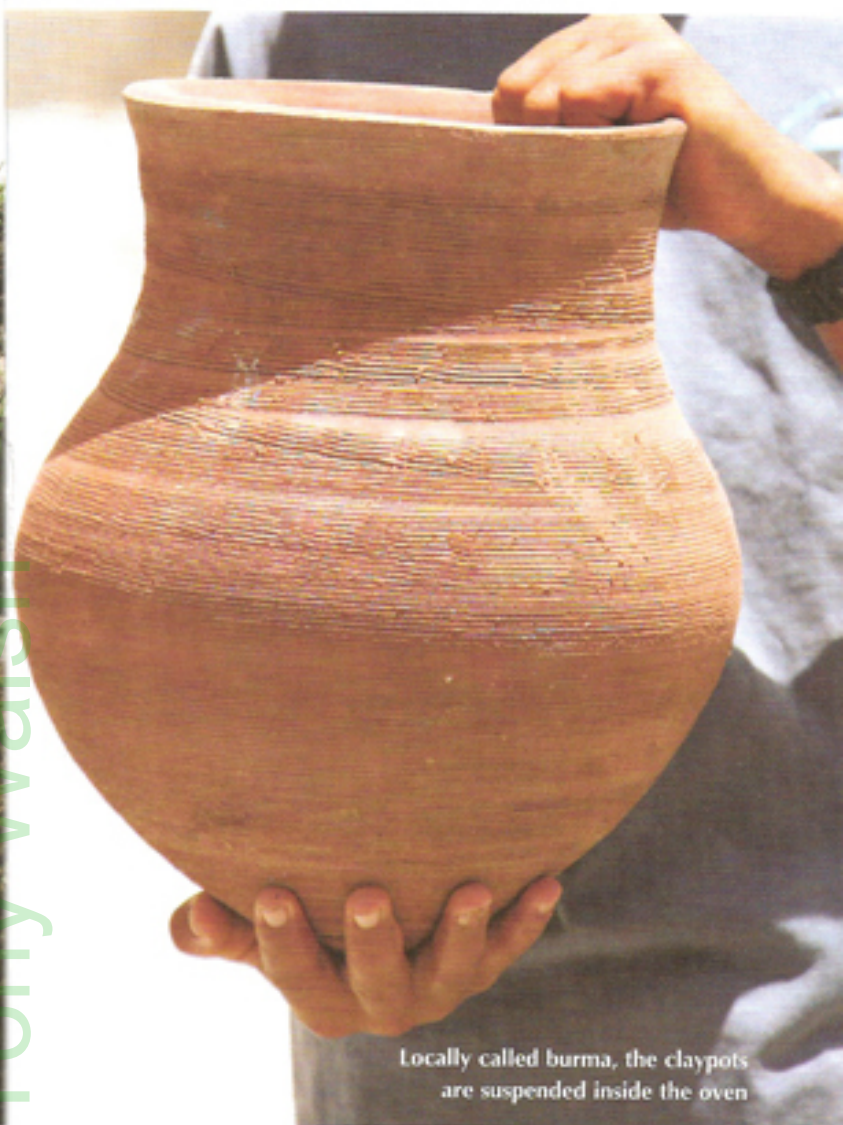
30°C. Here is the land of the Omani rose – Rose Damask (*Rosa Damascena*).

Quite how the rose bushes first reached Oman can only be speculated about; perhaps it was from ancient Persia where the rose has long been cultivated and whose ancient empire once included Oman. But given the extraordinary intensification of Omani agriculture in the 17th century under the Yaroubi rulers, it may well have been brought across from Persia then.

What I had stumbled on was a key process in the manufacture of Oman's sought after rose water. For many rose water producers in these mountains the start of their commercial success is the annual auction of the rights to harvest the rose petals from farmers who no longer manufacture the rose water. In early April, potential buyers gather in the fields below the village of Shurayjah and walk



Subeh Awlad Thani collecting roses



Locally called *burma*, the claypots are suspended inside the oven

together from field to field pausing only to conduct a mini auction when the rights to a field's harvest for a year are available. Be the fields small, or relatively large, the competition can be intense and with prices topping RO800 for some larger fields, the auction clearly needs deep pockets.

The morning after my encounter with the fiery furnace, I woke early and arrived in time to join the rose petal harvesters as they worked. Time is of the essence for the rose needs plucking in the cool of morning before the intense aroma of the flower evaporates. Plucking off the rose head encourages additional buds; a large bush may produce up to 3,000 blossoms during its season and a couple of hundred flowers may be ready for collection each morning.

The rose gardens in Jebel Akhdar are laid out, not on the mountain's plateau itself but cascade down precipitous mountain slopes.

Each field has been laboriously created over the centuries. Natural stones that were split away from the solid slopes of the mountain have been used to create the walls. Soil from the valleys below or the few depressions on the plateau where rainfall creates a build up of sediment, has been used to develop a fertile plot of land behind each wall. With such effort, it's not surprising that the fields on the terraces are small, often no more than a few square meters. The reason for this intense labour is that the water springs on the mountain are located on the cliff face and by using a *laly*, a man-made water channel, the water itself can also be made to cascade down, into each field on the rock face.

For some of the people harvesting the rose petals, their mini factory is just a short walk up a few terraces into the village; for others a drive in a truck of several kilometres may be needed. As



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soon as the roses reach the rose water production point they are laid out on a cloth and sprinkled with water to maintain their freshness.

At the core of the rose water production process is a *dahgan* (oven), that fiery furnace I had seen the previous day.

Nowadays made of cement but previously from mud, its size is in keeping with the fields where the roses come from – small. Suspended inside are several clay pots locally called *burna*. These are sealed in place at the top of the oven, above a fire. Today this oven may be gas fired but previously the wood of *Sidr* trees (*Ziziphus spina Christ*) was the fuel of choice. Inside the pot, a mixture of rose petals and water simmers away creating a heady steam. The steam is trapped inside the clay pot by a copper *qars* (bowl) which is filled with cold water. Finally, the steam condenses against the cool copper *qars* and drips into a *sahla* (small bowl) placed on top of the roses simmering below.

The quantity of this condensed rose water is small but even so, periodically the *qars* which has stoppered the *burna* is lifted out. Using a set of pliers the *sahla* which has been collecting the drops

of rose water can be taken out and its contents filtered into a large storage jar. This allows the water to settle and unfiltered sediment can drop to the bottom. The final stage is decanting the water into empty Vimto bottles, whose distinctive shape must be the expected container for all Jebel Akhdar rose water.

Through the clear glass of the Vimto bottle, it is apparent that this rose water is distinctive. Where rose water from other countries is clear, like water, Oman's has an amber colour to it. Its aroma carries not only the heady fragrance of the rose but also that of the *Sidr* smoke whose flame started the process.

It is this fragrant, smoky rose water that now finds its way into homes and food production units around Oman. Perhaps a few drops are added to Omani *qahwa* (coffee) or more generous quantities are poured into giant oversized copper cauldrons (*magia*) during the making of the classic Omani *hahwa* (a sweet much like Turkish delight). However it is used, the demand makes it certain that the next auction of the rose harvest will be as competitive as this year's. ■