

Make the most of good scents

By John Logie
special writer

For patrons of Magda Moursi, treatment begins the moment they walk into her Birmingham office.

A small machine hums quietly on a shelf in the corner. At first glance, the machine appears decorative. A delicate glass bell, filled with translucent liquid, rests atop a nondescript blue base. The base, despite its bland appearance is busily diffusing the contents of the bell throughout the room.

The odors, spread about the office by the diffuser, combine with the smells from various plants Moursi has selected to create a pleasant blend. But Moursi means to do more than just refresh her visitors.

Merely sitting in her office serves as a subtle introduction to aromatherapy — the art and science of using nasally and topically ingested plant materials to treat the body and the mind.

The blending of the odors is changed every three weeks to fit the needs of Moursi's patrons. Typically, she gears the blend to relax her visitors.

"People are really in such a very intense, fast type of life that I have yet to find a person that doesn't need to relax," Moursi said.

Aromatherapy is, to some extent, an ancient discipline. As early as 4,000 years ago, Chinese doctors were documenting the curative powers of certain plants. Moursi cites the work of the Greek physician Hippocrates and the burial practices of ancient Egyptians as ancestors to her practice.

"THE EGYPTIANS used many different oils to embalm bodies," Moursi said. "In fact, in some of the tombs they found alabaster jars with ointments that are still valid today, if you analyze them."

Moursi remembers becoming interested in plants and their curative properties while growing up in Egypt.

"As a person having a deep respect for the earth and whatever the earth has to give us as far as plants, I felt that there was a remedy in the plant world for almost every kind of ailment," she said. "So I started to study plants and herbs and aromatherapy, and I've been practicing this for over 25 years."

Moursi studied aromatherapy and skin treatment in France and practiced in Paris before moving to Southfield 18 years ago. She moved her office to downtown Birmingham in 1983. She returns to Europe annually to keep abreast of new developments in her specialty.

The modern practice of aromatherapy is popular in Japan and Europe — particularly in England and in France — but isn't especially popular in the United States.

MOUSRI IS one of, at most, a handful of practitioners of aromatherapy in the area and she combines it with more common skin and beauty treatments.

At present, Moursi uses 30-40 different oils but hopes to increase that number.

"In my learning, I get to know more and more plants and more and more oils," she said. "If you come see me in two years, I'll probably increase that to a hundred."

Moursi keeps her oils in a medicine cabinet in her reception area. They are stored in tiny brown bottles, which, she said, are necessary to preserve the odoriferous molecules of the essential oils. The diminutive bottles each have their own faint aroma and each features a tiny label.

SOME LABELS are handwritten, but some are elaborate tiny advertisements, with minuscule drawings of the plants from which the oils were derived and references to the special properties of the oils.

Moursi also keeps a shelf of books, including a polyglot guide to plant names and book by 70s natural food enthusiast Euell Gibbons.

Moursi's international background, and her ability to read in four languages is especially helpful as nearly all of the oils she uses must be imported from other countries.

Most of the oils in her cabinet hail from India, Malaysia, Tunisia or some equally distant locale. The only domestically produced (from Michigan) oil in Moursi's office is peppermint oil.

When a client visits Moursi for the first time, she begins a process of determining an appropriate blend of essential oils for that particular client. The factors governing the blend can range from the particular complaints of the individual to the condition of the skin, even the shape of the face and the plant leaves or the flower petals being used.

"I do something called intuitive blending," Moursi said. "I work with many different formulas and also really use my intuition as far as blending oils." She refers to the resulting blends as "synergies," which develop special properties when used in complementary combinations.

THE BLENDS reach Moursi's patrons in several ways. They can be applied topically as part of a face or neck massage. Oils also are directed at the nose through the use of a steamer, a device resembling a small teapot with a trigger handle and nozzle which draws oil and water from separate chamber and mixes them into a fine mist.

She also places blends into bottles so that patrons can apply or smell their blends at home.

Aromatherapy is a field where, to a certain extent, customer satisfaction is guaranteed. Smell is a personal matter and what smells pleasing or refreshing to one person might offend the nose of another. But Moursi has never sent a customer home with a blend that was, to the customer's nose, moldorous.

"In assessing and evaluating the client, this is all taken into consideration," she said. "If the person doesn't like the smell of something, there's no way they're going to use it. It will be doing a counter-effect."

While aromatherapy's name suggests a nasal focus, Moursi stressed the role of the skin as a receptor for essential oils.

"The skin is the largest organ of the whole body, so we don't want to exclude it," she said.

THAT PROPERTY is perhaps the most important for Moursi's practice. Essential oils are fat soluble and because they are derived from nature, easily transported from the skin throughout the body, she said.

"Within 20 to 60 minutes, these oils are penetrating to the deepest layers of the skin," Moursi said, "taking with them all these beneficial ingredients of each plant into the deepest parts."

She added that the oils are helpful in stimulating hormones, cleaning the pores, rejuvenating dry skin and even aiding people suffering from insomnia.

Michelle Gulswite, a vice president/associate creative director with Ross Roy Advertising in Bloomfield Hills, visits Moursi regularly for facials and aromatherapy. She feels that Moursi's methods have been at least as helpful as other therapies she has employed.

"My skin has really cleared up dramatically," she said. "I've been to dermatologists. It's not like I have terrible skin, but I tend to be one of those people that breaks out a little bit, and I find that my skin is just in better condition . . . my complexion's a little rosier."



Magda Moursi work the essential oils of rosemary, lavender, rosewood and geranium into the skin of

Carolyn Hefner of Birmingham as part of her aromatherapy.

The basics . . .

As the names implies, aromatherapy has to do with scents. Its main ingredients are the potent distilled plant essences, called "essential oils," derived by placing plant material like flower petals in a special receptacle and forcing steam through the material.

The mixture is allowed to evaporate, then cool. Water is then drawn from the material, leaving a highly concentrated oil, containing more than 100 complex constituents or ingredients.

Over the years, aromatherapist Magda Moursi of Birmingham has become somewhat of an expert on the lore behind various flora. She is adept at explaining how the sandalwood tree functions as a parasite, feeding from the roots of other trees without ever developing its own root systems.

She also tells the story of how Captain Cook's Australian settlers despaired at the absence of traditional tea and finally settled for boiling the leaves of an indigenous plant, calling it "teatree."

Moursi also has knowledge of the characteristics attributed to the various oils. Lemon oil, for example, tightens blood vessels and strengthens tissue. And pine and eucalyptus oils aid in respiratory metabolism by helping the skin to breathe better.

But knowledge about plants and their characteristics doesn't mean you can do aromatherapy. Forget do-it-yourself aromatherapy by simply surrounding yourself with the appropriate plants.

According to Moursi, the plants themselves do not provide powerful enough concentrations of their special properties.

And novices shouldn't dabble in the oils either since some of them are toxic. Moursi has eliminated all toxins from her practice, but an amateur might not know enough to do so, she said.

Designer clothing gets encore through resale

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an indication of Griffin's goal of filling the racks with good looking clothes that are in tip-top condition.

Another outfit that quickly caught the eye of several customers was a red wool trumpet skirt the owner had matched with a red sweater, accented with black leather piping and black mink at the shoulders. The two pieces weren't by the same designer, but the colors were identical and the young lady who bought them for under \$75 was elated.

"I'm going to wear this to my In-laws for dinner," she said, adding that her husband would never believe that she spent so little. "This was such a good price, I was able to pay cash and leave my credit card in my wallet."

Like every customer we talked with, this 32-year-old school teacher preferred not to give her name.

The anonymous shoppers aren't embarrassed to be seen in the store, but they'd just as well not publicize the fact that Mrs. So-and-So of Bloomfield Hills once owned the dress they're buying.

Although the stigma of resale clothing stores hasn't completely

'We have some spectacular evening dresses that cost anywhere from \$300 to \$1,000 when they were purchased new and we're selling them from \$65 to \$150.'

— Lois Griffin
Encore Encore

disappeared, Griffin feels the '90s will be a time when shops like hers start popping up in affluent areas all over the country.

"JUST TAKE a look at Los Angeles for example," she said. "The celebrities wear their beautiful gowns to the Academy Awards, then ship them off to the high class resale shops where the up and coming actresses buy them for less and don't mind saying that the dress is used."

Even though none of the dresses on the racks at Encore Encore were ever worn by Joan Collins or Elizabeth Taylor, there are several pieces on consignment that have been worn by Detroit area socialites and media personalities as well

as wives of major sports figures. Griffin hopes to convince some of the more well known ladies who consign clothing or buy at her shop to have photographs taken for her "Celebrity Corner."

The idea is still in the planning stages, so when a customer asks if a particular item belonged to anyone special, the saleswoman simply says "Shh, we're not allowed to tell."

Encore Encore, in the Village Commons shopping mall on Grand River in Farmington. Consignment arrangements can be made by calling 471-3704 during business hours.



Michelle Glibbard of Auburn Hills checks out a designer dress for sale at Encore Encore, a resale shop in Farmington Hills.

RANDY BORST/staff photographer