

Building a life in aroma and flavour

The Alembics Lab story

by **Jill Mulvaney**

Smell is such an evocative sensory experience, tied so closely with memory that ‘I remember’ is often the first thing that comes to mind. I remember the smell of the rotting walnut leaves under the trees, ambrosial quinces—almost nauseating for a young child—in the orchard, mint under a cherry tree, wet dogs, violets and gooseberries. The fecund stink of the chook house and the killing shed and the wet wool and dry leather where my father tanned the skins of the sheep. Hay, mown grass, wild water and river stones. Cut tobacco and homespun jumpers rich in lanolin. My earliest years as a child.

Then there is my mother’s French perfume, my grandmother’s eau de toilette and the rich, green olive oil she wiped over her face every evening. It would be wonderful to take the time and journal each year, month, week, and occasion with a smell that matches a memory. And perhaps I will try one day—I have undertaken similar projects for clients and friends as part of my work for The Alembics Lab, and it never fails to spark an amazing range of responses from people.

This is just one aspect of what I do in the course of my work. A typical day could see me and my team setting up several different distillations to investigate the properties of some of our native plants. Or it could be a product development consultation for individuals or companies (I work with businesses in the distilling, cosmetic, food and beverage industries). Sometimes it will be helping people formulate recipes for gins, aromatic spirits, zero ABV drinks, or working with natural flavour and aroma in foods or perfumes. People come to me with all manner of projects, and I love the variety.

My work today—distilling, consulting and teaching—is the result of following my nose (and my curiosity) throughout my life. Something that I encourage, even if you’re not sure at the time exactly where it will take you. It always leads to new experiences—and in my case, to the many different people I’ve worked with and learned from. All have been generous in sharing their knowledge, which has a profound influence on how I, in turn, work. I founded The Alembics Lab to encourage people to learn and experiment, and to kickstart their own products and ideas. One of the things I like the most about my work is collaborating with others— it gives me an interesting window into their lives, and so many times I am asked how I got started.

My beginnings lie in those remembered childhood scents, and in the flavours of the food I ate and cooked every day. And I think this is true of so many of us. In my 20s at university, I met an astrologer who told me he saw me working with small bottles resembling perfume. I thought it was ridiculous at the time as I never wore perfume or makeup. But I loved food, and I loved to eat and cook—and it was how I took my first step into a professional life with aroma and flavour—running a busy wholefood kitchen on a university campus in Perth.

It began simply enough, with a trestle table and a basket of filled rolls and croissants. Soon I was leasing a commercial kitchen and employing five people to help make everything from scratch. I insisted upon doing things ‘the right way’—all ourselves—as my mother and grandmother had taught me, and though the food was fantastic it’s what eventually exhausted me. I learned so much that I use today—how to source ingredients, buying wholesale, shopping at markets at 4am and the practicalities of production at a large scale. But after the birth of my third child, I was burnt out, and stopped for a breather.

This was when I met an older woman who was what I would now describe as a production herbalist. She worked with another woman I would now describe as a medical herbalist. Georgia had a large garden in the hills, and she and Leanne grew and processed a vast array of culinary, aromatic and medicinal herbs. Leanne had a small collection of essential oils and incorporated them into many of the products they made to sell. They took interns and I decided to become one and work alongside them.

This was the first time I encountered essential oils. Until then I'd only experienced scents as perfume, or had what I'd say was not great experiences with patchouli and other overwhelming fragrance oils synonymous with hippy culture. These oils were different—tea tree, clear fresh citrus, the beautiful lavender sourced from local Australian growers—and they were each used with purpose. This is also the place where I learned to identify, grow, and process various plants and developed a lasting respect and passion for them. Another stepping stone on my journey.

It inspired me to start my own herb garden in the city—no mean feat in Perth, which is primarily a giant dune, but I soon managed this large garden and was harvesting a lot of plant material. I didn't want to go back into food preparation on a commercial scale, but herbal craft didn't appeal to me either. I did however, feel the need to start looking after my skin (like my mother had admonished me to cleanse, tone and moisturise). I was in my early thirties, maybe had a wrinkle or two, and that hot Perth weather did dry you out. So I went to a department store to find the magic potion to restore my youth. I remember being overwhelmed by mirrors, frighteningly made-up women in white coats and gold jewellery all vying for my attention, and after a chronic allergic response, I fled sneezing and with eyes streaming.

This was far from ideal, and I knew straight away that I wanted something different—products that didn't cause such colossal irritation and come with the attending hard sell (and giant price tag). And I now had all these plants to hand, nurtured from my own garden, so I decided to begin making my own skincare products—why not? This has always been useful to me—saying 'why not', instead of 'that sounds too hard'. This was back in the early 90s, before the internet and the wealth of knowledge that's now at our fingertips, so it was a friend with a book on homemade skincare—found at a market and passed it on to me—that was my next stepping stone.

It was a good start but heavy on the beeswax and lanolin, while I aspired to a white, light cream that didn't have to be refrigerated like mayonnaise. I had made gallons of mayonnaise in my food prep days, so I understood emulsions—but how to translate this for skincare? It was pure luck that I chanced upon an answer, and to this day I can't exactly remember how, but I came across a man who was a commercial manufacturer of dog skincare products. He gave me some emulsifying wax and a preservative—and my first white cream was born. How could it be so easy?



A little knowledge may be dangerous for some, but it's an adventure for others. I bought my first set of essential oils, made herbal infusions and extracts and made cleansers, toners, moisturisers and shampoo. There were many trials and even more errors, but successes, too. I was astonished at how easy it was, and also angry at the system—I wanted women to know they never need to run the gauntlet in a department store again nor buy into that ridiculous marketing.

So I started offering workshops in my garden, and when that became too much, in local halls and community centres. The table was laid out with EOs, waxes and butters, fresh and dried herbs from my garden, preservatives, and containers—a feast. Everyone left with stabilised white creams that smelled amazing, and a complete skincare regime. And when they ran out, they returned to me asking to buy the raw materials. From there, a business grew and my first steps into formulating and learning about the properties of herbs and essential oils began.

A community of aromatherapists, herbal processors, and naturopaths were taking shape and became part of my network. People like Thea Burnett and Bill McGilvray strode into my life. Thea mentored me, taught me about the properties of EOs and introduced me to many I had no idea existed. Bill walked into my showroom one day with a bag of white dirt and a blue EO—Blue Cypress oil (*Callitris columellaris*, also known as *C. intratropica*). He was the first distiller I met, and with his stories of stills set up in the bush he ignited my passion for distillation.

All manner of people were coming to me with ideas and questions. I formulated skin care ranges for someone importing *Rosa damascena* oil from Bulgaria and artisan aromatic products for local citrus farmers. Our showroom was above an agency for sex workers and there was also an agency for bouncers next door. The girls would come visit during the day when it was quiet,

and we formulated a tremendous natural personal lubricant that they loved. For the bouncers we blended body oils and beard waxes and advised them on what they should get for their girlfriends.

There was a lot of work with aromatics, but no distillation yet. It took a personal upheaval—the break up of my marriage and a move back to New Zealand—for me to take my first steps into distilling. It was not only a place of new beginnings for me, but I was also now living in a country with one of the most liberal approaches to distillation in the world. The stage was set.

That's when a friend I hadn't seen for such a long time bought me a gift—a tiny copper still he found on eBay. I thought it was a gimmicky toy, so I gave them some orange leaves and suggested they see if it worked. It certainly did. When I walked back into the room, all I could smell was the heady scent of petitgrain, and when I think of it now I can still feel the shiver down my back and my scalp prickling. That was it—I was hooked.

and an artform. Distillation is a beautiful blend of science and art, a simple yet transformative process that is also an act of creation.

From these early beginnings where it was a niche craft, interest and knowledge of distilling has spread, and it has become more mainstream—largely due to the internet, social media and our ability to share information. But in those early days I was figuring it out on my own. I had a small studio in the back of my small garden. Outside was a covered area under a grapevine, where I set up my stills. Whenever I could, I would disappear there for hours and become immersed in the quiet, listening to the copper sing and working with the plants from my garden. I distilled everything I could to see what it was like. The growing, nurturing, watching, harvesting and then distilling anchored me in my senses, and I felt connected to a lineage of others. I remember stripping mugwort leaves and packing them into the copper alembic pot and feeling the presence of many others staring intently into the pot, watching alongside me.

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I needed to learn how to distil. I found myself a slightly bigger still, started my journey and pretty soon I was importing and selling these gleaming copper stills, which in turn led to teaching people how to use them.

I started small, with 2.5 and 5L stills because it's a great way to learn—the distillation times are relatively short and the amount of plant material needed can be readily supplied from your own garden or responsibly foraged from your surroundings. This means you can fit multiple distillations into a morning, a day or a weekend and really get to know both the techniques and your plants. It's how I advise anyone wanting to start out in distillation to take their first steps.

I was totally captivated that I could use one of these beautiful, shining stills to make small amounts of these precious oils—sometimes just 2 or 3 mls of EO from a plant that I'd grown or had found by the wayside. The discovery of hydrosol (aromatic waters) was even more of a magical mystery. Even though I was going solo, I felt connected in time to generations of women who had used similar stills in their homes—discovering a lost craft

I was quite happy doing my aromatic distilling, but I did feel alone. I didn't know anyone doing anything like I was apart from the spirit distillers, who seemed like a different kettle of fish (though later, I would explore alcohol distillation as well, and find it both fascinating and useful).

It was when I found a network of distillers through social media—The Artisan Distillers Facebook group—that I first met up with others on the same path of discovery. Ann Harman, Marco Valussi, Jessica Ring, Benoit Roger, and many more. There was an element of fervent excitement as we discovered new plants, and new methods. It's a vibrant, collegial and sometimes eccentric group, full of people with boundless curiosity. My tribe.

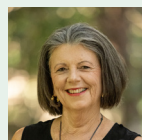
Here I found colleagues and mentors, and I reinforced new knowledge by carrying out hundreds of distillations, often using what I could find in my immediate surroundings. I found my plant allies—rosemary, lemon myrtle, kawakawa, bay, yarrow, ginger, eucalyptus (of many varieties) kanuka—all readily available, nothing too exotic, but all remarkable.

As my knowledge deepened, my curiosity as to ‘why’ and ‘how’ did also, alongside a growing awe of the sophistication of these fellow creatures we call plants. I began some deep exploration—especially with our NZ natives, which unlike many Australian natives don’t produce an EO in distillation. I had GCMS testing carried out which validated many of the traditional ways these plants had been used in traditional medicine and ritual. I refer to these analyses in my demonstrations and workshops as even if the layperson doesn’t understand the complexity of the myriad constituents, they can at least appreciate the incredible pharmacology that each plant has.

And this brings me back to the most important idea behind The Alembics Lab—sharing knowledge. Yes, we teach distillation and extraction techniques, but what I am most proud of is our rapidly-growing library of aromatic and botanical information that we readily share with whomever has the same curiosity. So you don’t have to be lucky, or wait to bump into a person who makes skincare products for dogs like I did—you can come straight to us and ask. If we don’t know, we’ll help connect you with people who do, and you in turn can become part of the same, generous community.

Through sharing our knowledge we have been able to show people who work with and enjoy EOs that it is possible to produce them on a small scale, either for personal use or at an artisan craft level. And of course, not everyone wants to be a distiller, just as not everyone wants to bake a cake or make jam, but understanding the process—how they are made and what plants they originate from—enriches the relationship and hopefully makes us all more discerning in our choices when sourcing, buying and using these oils.

I rarely buy EOs these days, hydrosols are my daily aromatic go-to (these aromatic waters are so versatile, but that’s a story for another time). The EOs I distil are treasures and tend to sit in state only to be bought out when I have a special occasion (and a clear purpose) for them. I am certainly not discouraging their use, rather I am encouraging the use of a wider range of aromatic products, as well as encouraging a curiosity for life-long learning.



Jill Mulvaney is a craft distiller with over 25 years experience. She teaches and consults on all aspects of distillation, aroma and natural flavour, advancing ideas and products that can be utilised across a range of industries: spirits, perfumery and cosmetics.

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