SPA RX

Scents & Sensibility

A PRIMER ON AROMATHERAPY • BY AIMEE LEE BALL

HIPPOCRATES WOULD HAVE LOVED TODAY'S SPAS. THE FATHER OF MODERN MEDICINE IS WIDELY quoted as having said, "The way to health is to have an aromatic bath and scented massage every day." The good doctor would surely have signed up for the "essential rose body wrap" offered at Lake Austin Spa Resort or the "euphoria body ritual" with sage and geranium at Canyon Ranch.

One of the foundation stones of spa treatments, aromatherapy has a rich anecdotal and folkloric history. There are cave paintings in Lascaux, France, dating back nearly 20,000 years that depict the burning of aromatic plants, a ritual thought to drive out evil spirits. The archaeologists who opened King Tut's tomb found pots with traces of the frankincense and myrrh that Egyptian priests and alchemists used for healing, and during the early Roman Empire, Plutarch wrote about the intoxicating effect of an herbal blend that was burned in temples, noting that it "lulled one to sleep, allayed anxieties, and brightened dreams." In the plague-ravaged Europe of the 17th century, hollow, fragrance-filled walking sticks and pomanders were both thought to provide armor against the infection.

It was an accidental instance of healing that gave rise to aromatherapy. The term was coined by the early-20th-century French perfume chemist Rene-Maurice Gattefosse, who, having burned his hand during an experiment, plunged it into the nearest container of liquid to quell the pain. The container held

lavender oil. Amazed at how quickly the burn healed, Gattefosse began experimenting, using oils of thyme, lemon, and clove on the wounds of soldiers during World War I. His 1937 book on the subject was called *Aromatherapie.* Today the term means "treatment based on the curative properties of essential oils."

No one disputes the power of smell to affect mental states and even behavior. (See "How the Nose Knows," right.) Anthropologist Margaret Mead reported that in primitive cultures, tribes sometimes went to war because they were antagonized by one another's bodily smells. Fragrant baths are used in Amazonian Brazil to purify and protect the body, and in parts of India smelling the head is a traditional greeting, considered a means of filling oneself with the other's presence. Among the Ongee of the South Pacific, the equivalent of "How are you?" is "When/why/where is the nose to be?"

In spa treatments, essential oils that contain the active ingredients of plants in concentrated form are incorporated into massages and blended into baths. They're called volatile oils because they evaporate. Most are extracted by steam distillation; in the case of citrus, the peels are mechanically pressed.

It's the use of the word *curative* in aromatherapy that begs examination. In my random perusal of spa menus and literature on essential oils, I came across claims that they were antiviral, antifungal, antibacterial, anti-inflammatory, sedative to the nervous system, cytophylactic (meaning restoring or regenerating cells), and aphrodisiac (you know what that means). The International Federation of Aromatherapists, a London-based group, claims that aromatherapy can help skin problems, digestion, lack of stamina, aches and pains, and anxiety. "Whether you are stressed or just wish to feel deeply relaxed, aromatherapy can give you a peaceful sleep and help increase your vitality," states the IFA website. "If you are unwell, aromatherapy can help your body to help itself and speed up recovery."

It's a mountain of claims supported by a molehill of evidence. The Sense of Smell Institute, the nonprofit educational arm of the American fragrance industry, has coined and trademarked the term *aroma-chology* to describe the study of how specific smells affect human mood and behavior—but limits the field to those that can be measured in scientific experiments, usually done by tracing brain activity and psychological response to determine statistical significance. There has been some interesting research in this area (see "Oils with Track Records" on page 128), but few studies meet the gold standard, being published in peer-reviewed scientific journals and demonstrating specific claims about specific fragrances, accord-

How the Nose Knows

The perception of odors and aromas begins with currents of air swirling up the nostrils to the nasal epithelium, a piece of tissue about the size of a postage stamp. It has millions of sensory receptor cells, each of which has tiny filaments called cilia. These are laced with proteins that grasp for particular fragrance molecules in air currents. Each cell also has a long filament called an axon that is connected to the olfactory bulb in the brain and, through it, to other nerve cells there. When a protein finds its particular odor, the sensory cell sends out electrical signals along the axon. From the millions of axons, a pattern of activity materializes, which scientists now think is interpreted as a unique smell—one for lilacs, one for skunks, one for broccoli. (Most food aromas are received not through the front of the nose but through the back of the throat by a process known as retronasal olfaction. What we call the taste of food is mostly its smell.) Information about an odor pattern is conveyed to other regions of the brain, including the limbic system, which is involved with emotional memory.

It's that unique anatomical connection between the olfactory cortex of the brain and the limbic system that links the sense of smell to emotion like none of our other senses, according to Rachel S. Herz, a visiting professor in the department of psychiatry and human behavior at Brown University Medical School in Providence, Rhode Island. But the perception of an aroma as, say, "calming" or "energizing" is learned, she explains. "There's no such thing as an innate response to smell. Smells do not have emotional meaning in and of themselves. A smell is positive or negative to you, and you came to have that response through experience, which can be personal or cultural. If you have never smelled a fragrance before, whether as an infant or adult, you decide whether you like it or not based on the context. The odor becomes a proxy for the emotion through association." Herz recalls a woman who hated the smell of roses because the first time she smelled them was at her mother's funeral.

The only exceptions are odors that have a strong trigeminal component, which means they strongly irritate certain nerves in the nasal cavity. This is often felt as burning or cooling, and two substances that produce it are pepper and ammonia.

ing to Rachel S. Herz, a visiting professor in the department of psychiatry and human behavior at Brown University Medical School in Providence, Rhode Island, and a reigning expert on smell. "People are very suggestible when it comes to smells because we can't see them, and suggestions can be quite powerful and reinforcing," she says. "The proof is the ability to pass scientific rigor. It's not enough to say, 'Look, somebody did this here.' The issues need to be much more finessed and dissected."

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Despite lack of scientific evidence, aromatherapy advocates claim the benefits of essential oils are real, if elusive. "The most difficult number to get—and we still do not have the instrumentation to measure it—is feeling better," says Sharon Christie, the president of Aromafloria, a product company in Huntington Station, New York. "But I am a big proponent of the placebo effect. If somebody says you're going to feel better, isn't that powerful medicine? We know that when you combine touch and smell, you get a synergy. It comes down to which oils should be used."

There are plenty of choices in the botanical pharmacopoeia, both familiar and esoteric. "Every scent has about 120 ingredients and will have a few qualities, like stimulating or calming," says Cord Coen, whose Zents line of products, based on essential oils, is found at spas such as the Broadmoor in Colorado, Qua Baths at Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas, and Little Dix Bay in the Virgin Islands. "It's a potion, affecting us on a pretty deep level. But we don't have as many facts backed by the FDA as many of us would like."

For those who have drunk the Kool-Aid, the subject of aromatherapy is nuanced. "I take a middle-line approach," says Barbara Close, the founder and president of Naturopathica, a day spa in East Hampton, New York, and a line of aromatherapy products. "I have the scientific basis when I can get it but keep an open mind, because there are many things that can excite the healing response and I don't know if we can scientifically prove it." Close refers to aromatherapy as phytotherapy, meaning based on plants. "Sometimes you chop up a plant and steep it in water and have tea; sometimes you chop up a plant and steep it in alcohol and have a treatment. As a proprietor, I can't make health claims, but we're using volatile essences from plants to heal the body, with a range of therapeutic effects. There is a scientific basis to how we use essential oils. Since those substances attach to the olfactory bulbs next to the limbic system, which houses memory, we get into froufrou emotional science: You smell vanilla and flash back to baking cookies with Mom."

It's at the crossroad of feel-good treatments and therapeutic claims that controversy arises. In an article cunningly titled "Why Aromatherapy Works (Even If It Doesn't)" published in the *British Journal of General Practice,* Andrew Vickers, a researcher in integrative medicine at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City, seems to make a case for aromatherapy. "Few who have received a back rub would doubt that massage is relaxing," he writes. "Indeed, there is considerable evidence from randomized trials that massage reduces anxiety scores. If massage is effective, then aromatherapy—massage plus essential oils—is also effective (unless essential oils are harmful, which seems unlikely).... If aromatherapists want to add essential oils to a massage, then that should largely be their business. Clinical researchers should be no more exercised by this practice than by that of psychotherapists who enhance the ambience and comfort of the consulting room with plants, pictures, and cushions."

Then Vickers drops the other shoe. "If essential oils add to the value of a massage, then it is unlikely that they do so to any ▶

GETTING UNDER YOUR SKIN

Spas often claim that essential oils deliver benefits by getting through the skin and into the bloodstream. Here's why that's possible:

- Before being applied, essential oils are usually mixed with a carrier oil, a fat, which the skin easily absorbs.
- Essential oils are composed of small molecules, which have an easier time getting through the skin, according to Audra Stinchcomb, an associate professor of pharmacy at the University of Kentucky in Lexington and chief scientific officer at AlTranz, a pharmaceutical-development company.
- But absorption depends partly on how much essential oil is in the solution—the more the better, according to Stinchcomb.
- It also depends on how much skin surface is covered and for how long. Again, the more and the longer the better.
- For more on transdermal absorption, visit the archive at www.luxuryspafinder magazine.com for the July-August 2006 "Spa Rx" and "Getting Under Your Skin," May-June 2006.

Sniffing Out a Good Aromatherapy Product

It's an aromatherapy jungle out there. The Food and Drug Administration has never defined the term, but the agency takes a dim view of many therapeutic claims made for aromatherapy, including assertions that it can improve well-being and strengthen the body's self-defense mechanisms.

The Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act lumps aromatherapy products in the same category as perfumes and cosmetics, intended "for cleansing, beautifying, promoting attractiveness, or altering the appearance." Claiming that an aroma can make someone feel more attractive generally does not require FDA approval; any suggestion that a scent can treat or prevent a condition or disease, or otherwise affect the body's structure or function, may cause the product to be regulated as a drug. But enforcement is predicated on "public health priorities and available resources"—in other words, caveat emptor.

Product labels are not necessarily much help, either. The label doesn't even have to state that a product is synthetic, meaning it isn't made from real oils at all.

"Essential oils should be produced by purely physical means and be 100 percent pure and wholly derived from the named botanical source, but how are these standards to be guaranteed?" asks British biochemist Tony Burfield, who maintains a website on the subject (www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~nodice/). "No quality standards for the authentication of essential oils exist in aromatherapy, in spite of the revelations of gross adulteration."

Some labels can mislead even when they seem to reassure. Take the word *organic*. "The best frankincense comes from Somalia, but it's highly unlikely that it's ever going to be certified as organic," says Geraldine Howard, the founder and president of the London company Aromatherapy Associates, whose products can be found in spas such as Canyon Ranch and the Golden Door. "As with buying limp organic carrots, I'd rather have something conventional but fresh."

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So what's a consumer to do? Here are three commonsense litmus tests:

■ **Trust the price point** "If a half-ounce bottle of rose oil costs $12, it's probably synthetic," says Barbara Close, the founder and president of Naturopathica, a day spa and product company in East Hampton, New York. "A half ounce of genuine rose oil would probably cost well over $100. The rose petals are handpicked in Bulgaria, and it takes 2,000 pounds of petals to yield one pound of essential oil. Floral oils are hard to distill, so things like rose, jasmine, and neroli are going to be expensive."

■ **Trust your nose** "With a synthetic, there's a big burst of fragrance and then your nose goes blind, like when you walk into an elevator and someone is wearing Obsession," says Close. "The synthetic absorbs into the olfactory bulb more quickly. With the real thing, it's like sticking your hooter into a glass of Pinot Noir—your nose goes on a slow little journey."

■ **Trust the packaging** "See if it's packaged in glass," says Jenefer Palmer, the founder of the Osea skin-care line. "Any product that contains more than 3 percent of essential oils will not hold up in plastic." Guy Vincent, the head of research and development at Aromatherapy Associates, amends this statement to exempt HDPE (high-density polyethylene), a plastic that does not allow essential oils to pass through (up to 10 percent concentrations). But he brings up another concern: "I find it ironic that companies brag about 'no petrochemicals' in their product and then they put it in plastic." Unfortunately, while there are many regulations about ingredient labeling, there are few about containers, other than the FDA's requirement that packaging must be "safe for its intended use." You can recognize HDPE because packaging made of it displays the recycling code for it, a triangle with arrows, the number 2, and the letters HDPE.

Good Scents Products made with high-quality oils at high concentrations

PRODUCT	KEY INGREDIENTS	RECOMMENDED FOR	BRAND RESUME	PRICE
Aromatherapy Associates Revive Morning Bath & Shower Oil	Pink grapefruit, rosemary, eucalyptus	Invigorating, energizing, mental alertness	Aromatherapy leader known for high-quality oils; used in dozens of luxury spas	$50 at www.beautyhabit.com
Buddha Nose Bodhi Balm	Cedarwood, frankincense, juniper berry	Relaxing, treating sore muscles	Natural line founded by aromatherapist and shiatsu practitioner Amy Galper; popular with the yoga set	$22 at www.buddhanose.com
Decléor Aromessence Néroli Oil	Sandalwood, neroli, juniper, sage, parsley	Calming irritation and inflammation, toning, revitalizing	Parisian spa line created in 1974 with a mass-market following	$63.50; visit www.decleor.com for spas
Essencia Sweet Lavender Soaking Bath Salts	Lavender	Promoting restful sleep	Aromatherapist Juliana Lipe studied essential oils in Provence, where she obtains many ingredients	$16 at www.essenciaonline.com
In Fiore Fleur Vibrante Face Balm	Calendula, rose-hip seed, sea buckthorn, jasmine	Calming irritation and inflammation	Apothecary-style line founded by aromatherapist Julie Elliott, a formulary expert	$68 at www.infiore.net
Liz Earle Vital Oils for the Bath, Bliss	Sandalwood, jasmine, black pepper, ylang-ylang	Promoting mental clarity, warming, stimulating circulation, soothing aches	Natural line founded in 1996 by former beauty editor Liz Earle and businesswoman Kim Buckland; came Stateside in 2005	$17 at www.lizearle.com
Primavera Heart of Rose Aroma Roll-on	Rose, rose geranium	Uplifting, soothing, harmonizing, balancing	German organic line founded 20 years ago; supports fair-trade cooperatives and biodynamic farmers around the world	$17 at www.saffronrouge.com
Sanoflore Organic Anti-Ageing Cream	Magnolia, rose hips, neroli, borage	Smoothing wrinkles, hydrating and protecting skin	French organic company (organic product content on each box) recently purchased by L'Oreal	$32.50 at www.beauty.com
This Works Deep Calm Bath and Shower Oil	Lavender, vetiver, chamomile	Relaxing, restful sleep	High-concentration line launched in 2005 by Kathy Phillips, ex–British *Vogue* beauty director, and the creators of Aromatherapy Associates	$63 at www.thisworks.com
Warren Botanicals Muscle & Joint Relief Oil	Ginger, cypress, geranium, black pepper, rosemary	Calming inflammation, reducing water retention and soreness	Botanical line by Hawaii's veteran spa-product maker Sharon Warren	$35 at www.warrenbotanicals.com

great extent," he writes. "Authors of aromatherapy textbooks seem to feel comfortable making a large number of extraordinary (and sometimes contradictory) claims in the absence of systematically collected data." Vickers mentions claims touting geranium for anything from frostbite to infertility, cypress for anything from rheumatism to hemorrhages, and juniper for anything from sexual enhancement to sedative. In my own little journey through the world of aromatherapy, I found references to jasmine for impotence or frigidity, frankincense for gonorrhea or heavy menstrual flow, and tea-tree oil for athlete's foot or head lice.

I do not suffer from any of these conditions, but I love a good massage, and I figure it can't hurt to see what essential oils can bring to the party. The Four Seasons Hotel in New York City uses products from the British company Aromatherapy Associates. "When you have an aromatherapy treatment, if the therapist doesn't ask more than 'Do you want a relaxing or reviving treatment?' she's not doing her job," says Geraldine Howard, a cofounder of the line. AA has formulations to relax, de-stress, revive, rescue, renew, and balance; the company recommends use of its "consultation card" to determine a client's needs, with choices such as "under pressure," "emotionally drained," "jet-lagged," "long hours at computer," "overexercising," "mood swings," "need pampering," "too much time in polluted atmosphere," and "want the party vibe." Howard explains that there is a difference between, say, relaxing and de-stressing. "To me, relaxing means switching off, and if we use something like chamomile, you might not feel like focusing on a project or a job afterward. De-stressing means you need to get rid of physical tensions but don't want to clear the mind. Aromatherapy can do all those things for you."

The Four Seasons doesn't use the AA consultation card—blame it on "the New York state of mind," according to spa director Chris Pulito. "For every person who arrives early enough to complete the questionnaire," he says, "there are ten people we're upsetting because they have to fill out another piece of paper in order to have a massage." But therapist Geri Ryan asks about my current mind-body status—she notices that I was on the treadmill in the gym earlier, for instance, and asks what I'll be doing when I leave. Then she lets me sample four blends of essential oils, ultimately deciding on some relax formula and some rescue. The massage follows a prescribed sequence that fuses Western and Eastern styles: There's chakra balancing along the spine; pressure to the craniosacral area and over the ganglia (clusters of nerves beside the spinal column); Swedish and neuromuscular strokes on the shoulders and scalp; fluid balancing over the bladder meridian; and a bit of reflexology. I'm aware of the reasoning for this sequence only after the treatment; while Ryan's hands are on me, I'm simply slipping into a deeply relaxed state. And when a friend calls later that afternoon with a last-minute offer of a theater ticket, I accept but find I can barely stay awake during the performance.

The La Prairie spa at the Ritz-

Spa Laboratory

Most Thursdays, guests at Rancho La Puerta in Tecate, Mexico, can visit the spa's five-acre organic farm for a little lab work that engenders a real appreciation for aromatherapy. Anita Boen, the farm's director of operations, stuffs the glass container of a distillation apparatus known as an alembic with the flowers, leaves, roots, or seeds of an aromatic plant—today it's lemon verbena. The container is fitted into a flask of boiling purified water, and the steam releases the plant's cellular water and aromatic compounds. When the steam is cooled, there two substances: the recondensed lightly aromatic water known as hydrosol and the essential oil.

Boen explains that different varieties of the same plant may have totally different properties or chemistries. One sample of lavender oil held under my nose makes me shudder—it has a distinct menthol quality—while one from another crop is delicate. "In order to know which plants will produce something that's aesthetically pleasing, we have to grow many varieties," she says. Boen explains "plant wisdom" (botanicals produce aromatic compounds in response to their environment) and reveals how much plant material it takes to make essential oils. Lemon verbena yields an especially low percentage: About two pounds generates six ounces of hydrosol, which can be used for some lotions and potions, but less than a milliliter of essential oil.

The alembic here is mostly for demonstration. Nearby is a large custom-made still that can handle three wheelbarrows full of a plant at a time; the goal is to produce enough natural essential oils to use in treatments at the spa. Boen rails against counterfeit ingredients. "About 90 percent of what's sold as perfume is synthetically produced," she says. "You can patent a molecule that's been synthesized and sell it to perfumers. It's one of the most lucrative things you can do. But we coevolved with plants. Our senses know them. Synthetics are foreign to us, and our bodies don't know what to do with them."

Carlton in New York City offers aromatherapy massages with five essential oils (geranium, lavender, orange, peppermint, and rosemary) and four "seasonal" blends. The descriptions are a bit puzzling: How can geranium be both sedative and uplifting? I choose orange, which promises to "ease tension and frustration" and "convey joy and positivity." Lead therapist Elizabeth Rutigliano adds 15 drops to a carrier oil of grapeseed, jojoba, apricot kernel, peach kernel, and safflower. She oils her hands and rubs them under my nose while I inhale, then drops a tissue with some of the oil on the floor under the face cradle while she works. When I turn onto my back, she gives me an eye pillow with an insert that contains some oil, too. "People tend to treat aromatherapy like energy work or vitamins," she says. "I can't say that a certain session will cure you of your issues, but it's a matter of how much does someone want to take care of herself and possibly get results?" I'm pretty joyous and positive afterward—from Rutigliano's strong hands, the orange oil, or both?

Six blends of essential oils from Espa are offered in the aromatherapy treatments at the Mandarin Oriental Spa in New York City. "We begin in the face region," explains group spa trainer Bonnie Baker. "In Chinese medicine, stress, abnormality, and disharmony in the body begin in the head, so we work on the pressure points, relaxing that area. We try to disengage the brain from making the decision about which blend to use. We'll allow guests to smell the oils on their own skin, and judging from what their attraction is, what they feel the stronger smell is, we'll take that as an indication of what's best for their body." When I tell therapist Nicole Yi that I'm somewhat sleep-deprived, she lets me test two blends that are meant to be uplifting, and I choose the "fitness" oil. It contains clove, rose-

Aromatherapist Training

There are no state regulations, licensure, or laws governing the practice of aromatherapy in the United States. The topical application of essential oils requires a professional license—massage therapist, acupuncturist, and naturopath all qualify—but not necessarily training in aromatherapy. A massage therapist could practice it having done nothing more than read a book on essential oils. Offering aromatherapy consultations or creating custom blends for home use can be done without any license. That's why there are zillions of these offers on the Internet.

The National Association of Holistic Aromatherapy in Spokane, Washington, offers a "certificate of professional membership," requiring one of the following: graduation from an aromatherapy training program with a minimum of 200 hours, proof of four years' direct experience and education in the theory and practice of aromatherapy, or passage of the Aromatherapy Registration Council national exam. Registration is recognized for five years and entitles use of the honorific initials R.A.

The NAHA maintains a list of approved aromatherapy schools (it includes home-study programs) but does not police them after approval is granted, and the NAHA certificate does not confer any legal status. The terms *clinical* and *certified* before *aromatherapist* refer only to recognition from a particular school. NAHA also maintains a code of ethics that exhorts members to "represent education, training, qualifications, and abilities honestly" and "acknowledge the limitations of skills."

"The public needs to ask questions when scheduling an appointment for aromatherapy services," says Kelly Holland Azzaro, a vice president of the NAHA and the owner of Ashi Therapy in Banner Elk, North Carolina. "Ask about the aromatherapist's training and education—there are some companies offering weekend training. People should know that aromatherapists must work within the scope of their practice and not make medical claims about essential oils. Some spas and holistic facilities will work with purchased blends and just apply these to clients without doing a health intake or finding out about allergies or possible contraindications of use."

HIGH-TECH SCENTS

The Pennsylvania company Aromapothecary creates its products using computer technology. Cheryl Sott—a self-described former martini-drinking, Vegas-going, type A Wall Street maven—started the company after an automobile accident left her with a concussion and a "New Age-y" friend recommended essential oils. Sott created a software program, now used at spas such as the Golden Door and Las Ventanas al Paraiso, that matches personality type to aromatherapy blend. Customers answer multiple-choice questions such as: "I am secretly…insecure, stubborn, envious, unmotivated, self-critical, self-centered, or misunderstood." "It took four years to develop the math behind the program," says Sott, "and the algorithm is based on chemistry. A lot of essential oils don't even smell nice, but the software knows which ones are stinky and puts them in proportion with others as a perfumer would. What we hope we're achieving is eliminating the burden on the therapist in acquiring all that knowledge."

mary, peppermint, eucalyptus, Indian bay, and lavender and is said to be "ideal for anyone who has an active lifestyle." The skin-sloughing scrub she uses has a distinctive spearmint scent, and the footbath part of the ritual uses myrrh, orange, and palmarosa. I'm a mixed bouquet. By the time I reclaim my street shoes (they're whisked away at the door) I have enough energy to meet a friend for dinner and a movie. (Okay, I yawn through the film, but out of boredom, not sleepiness.)

So does aromatherapy work? As so often happens when considering the value of spa treatments, the answer depends on whom—and where—you're asking. In Japan, the term *kansei* refers to a kind of "sensory engineering." One way the Japanese practice it is by spreading aromas in public spaces such as airports, train stations, and hotels, to enhance behavior and create a more positive environment. It's something we could use in this country, says Clifford R. Bragdon, the dean of University College at the Florida Institute of Technology in Melbourne. "As we plan and design our cities, we use only one of our senses—sight," he says. "We could use our sense of smell to enhance our experience and make the built environment a more desirable to place to live and work. We need blind architects and city planners with sensitive noses." When he was the director of the National Aviation and Transportation Center at Dowling College in Long Island, New York, Bragdon led a group of urban planners in trying to use aromatherapy at the Port Authority Bus Terminal in Manhattan. "We took measurements about putting aroma into the HVAC system to mitigate diesel fumes and make it seem less like a NASCAR track. We got almost to the point of doing it but were stopped by red tape."

So until *kansei* is widely adopted in this country, there's really only one answer to the question of whether your vanilla candle, your lavender bath oil, and your peppermint foot massage are worth the money: How do you feel?

AIMEE LEE BALL *is a contributing editor at* O: The Oprah Magazine.

Oils with Track Records

LAVENDER

At the University of Florida College of Dentistry in Gainesville, dental patients who had an inhalation treatment with lavender indicated that pain intensity and unpleasantness were reduced. The Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami School of Medicine found that lavender had two significant effects: It improved mood and helped people perform math computation faster.

ROSEMARY

The Touch Research Institute also studied depressed mothers and their newborn babies. Exposure to rosemary and lavender resulted in shifts in activity from the right frontal lobe of the brain, which is associated with negative states like sadness, to the left frontal lobe, which is associated with positive states like happiness. At the Aberdeen Royal Infirmary in Foresterhill, Scotland, massage with rosemary (along with lavender, thyme, and cedarwood) was deemed to be an effective treatment for alopecia, an autoimmune disease that causes hair loss.

VANILLA

At Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City, a vanilla-like fragrance administered to patients undergoing MRIs helped them to feel significantly less anxious.

CHAMOMILE

At the Marie Curie Cancer Care Center in London, patients who were given massages with Roman chamomile had a reduction in anxiety, compared to those given massages without aromatherapy. "But the results must be viewed with caution," says Susie Wilkinson, the chair of England's National Cancer Research Institute Complementary Therapies Development Group. "I do not believe from that research that any claim should be made regarding Roman-chamomile essential oil."

PEPPERMINT

Athletes at Wheeling Jesuit University in West Virginia who inhaled peppermint had less fatigue, better hand-grip strength, and lower heart rate, blood pressure, and oxygen consumption. The reason showed up on CAT scans. "There's an area of the brain called the reticular activating system," explains Bryan Raudenbush, an associate professor of psychology. "Less stimulation there puts us to sleep at night, and more stimulation wakes us up in the morning. With peppermint, you see more activity, as if the scent is stimulating the area of brain responsible for alertness." In another study, Raudenbush found that peppermint diminished the response to pain. "We have a machine that circulates water at right above freezing, and we can submerge assorted body parts. When peppermint is administered, people say it doesn't hurt as much and they can keep that part of their body in the water for a longer period of time."