



Pearls give up a sweet secret

Kim Macdonald

A Perth-based luxury goods company has been given a \$1.1 million grant to commercialise the world's first perfume made from pearls.

Essential Oils of Tasmania, a subsidiary of Perth-based Atlas Pearls and Perfumes, will use the grant from Commercialisation Australia to build a plant in Tasmania to extract ingredients from South Sea pearls for their fragrant properties.

Atlas chairman Stephen Birkbeck said its salty, floral pearl perfume, Ayu, was designed by Parisian master Michel Roudnitska, whose father Edmond was the legendary creator of some of the world's most famous fragrances, including Dior's Eau Sauvage.

Atlas plans to broaden its production of Ayu, which it already sells on a small scale at its Claremont store, and will also sell the extract to other perfumeries.

Mr Birkbeck said he had interest from some of the world's biggest perfumeries, many of which already purchase sandalwood products from his former company, Mount Romance.

Atlas is taking the same left-field approach to making perfume as Mr Birkbeck did when he built the Mount Romance empire.

He kicked off the range of beauty products in 1990 by boiling emu fat in his kitchen to use in oils and skincare.

By the time he sold the company to Holistic Products Group for \$19.5 million in 2005, he had forged strong links with the cosmetics, perfume and fashion industries in France and helped to spawn a \$1 billion Australian sandalwood export market.

Mr Birkbeck believes the new plant in Tasmania, which will also extract fragrances from truffles and boronia flowers, will kickstart new income streams and export markets.

The pearl-based Ayu range includes soaps and moisturisers that claim to penetrate the skin with anti-aging pearl proteins.

Mr Birkbeck discovered the pearl fragrance in 2008 while on his cattle farm in Denmark in the South West. He researched how to extract proteins from pearls in a bid to use more of the harvested oyster, which had previously been discarded.

"I came across it be accident really," he said.

"I was smelling it and because I used to be in the perfume industry, I thought, wow."

EOT incoming managing director Stephen Gleeson will manage the next stage of growth.



Smell of success: Stephen Gleeson and Stephen Birkbeck, of Essential Oils of Tasmania. Picture: Sharon Smith