

Ambergris: Myths, Truths, & Half-Truths

A trunk full of ambergris. Image: Claire Vukcevic

A primer on what ambergris is and isn't, plus a list of reference ambergris fragrances and attars

"Are those your rocks, Pat?" asks the bartender when he brings us our drinks, staring at what must be over €10,000 worth of ambergris spread across the table. Pat Lillis, the man who has placed it there, just gives him a wink.

I wonder if he's worried about security, but he tells me that this is only a fraction of his stash, and that the rest is in a "secure location." With the type of money involved in ambergris, I wouldn't be surprised if there was a steel bunker under his vegetable patch.

It's May 2016, and we're sitting in the bar at Stella Maris Hotel in Kilkee, County Clare. It's a balmy 25 degrees outside (unusual for Ireland) and while my husband and children paddle in the sea, Pat and I examine the greyish-brownish lumps together, sniffing them, poking them with hot needles, and even crumbling bits off into our coffee. It's surreal – and probably the most fun I've had since getting into

perfume.

Pat Lillis is a very interesting man. Most people who find ambergris stumble upon it by chance. But a few people go actively looking for it, and Pat Lillis is one of those people. Once a beleaguered social worker, he now spends his time trawling up and down the West coast of Ireland with his small team of helpers (all family – no outsiders) and his dog, an old truffle hunter from Italy who he's re-trained as an ambergris sniffer-outer.

It all started when he found a lump of ambergris one day on the beach and figured out what it was. He trained himself, his family members, and finally the dog in how to recognize its shape and aroma. There's no real trick in it, he explains, just that most people don't recognize what they're looking at when they find it. He once even found a large piece of medium-grade ambergris in a trashcan, thrown in there by some well-meaning local who was cleaning up the beach. "I almost felt guilty about taking that piece," Pat laughs.

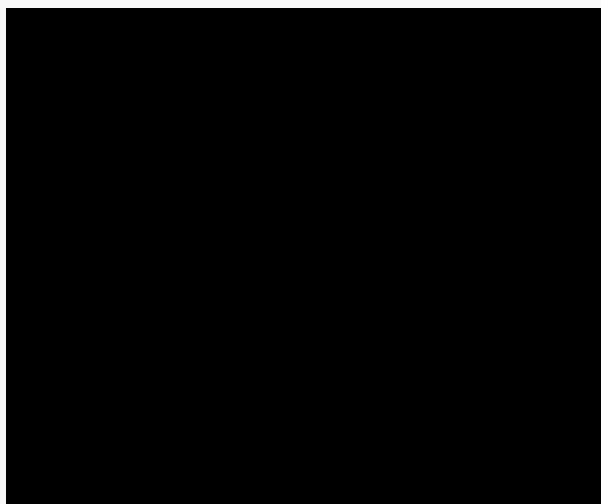


Ambergris close up. Image: Claire Vukcevic

It's a serious business, with the whole family decamping to the rocky coast of Scotland a few times a year for up to a month a go. It seems that nobody in Scotland is looking very hard for ambergris either, because he finds plenty of it. I ask him if there would be any ambergris to be found on the beaches where I live, on the East Coast, but he is quick to point out something about ocean currents floating the pieces in out from the Atlantic and the cragginess of the Western coasts. Hmm. (That hasn't stopped me from looking though).

Needless to say, the amounts of money involved in this business are staggering. Pat sells his ambergris through his online store, Celtic Ambergris, but could tell me next to nothing about his customers because they are all middlemen for private buyers and the big Emirati perfume and attar houses. "I could be selling to Creed for all I know," shrugs Pat. "But I don't know. I have no way of knowing where this stuff ends up."

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One needs a strong stomach to deal with the cloak-and-dagger secrecy of the ambergris scene. The murkiness of the business, Pat explains, is partly to do with the legal and ethical uncertainties hovering over ambergris itself, and partly to do with secrecy over perfume formulas. What's sure, Pat says, is that there are too many myths and half-truths about ambergris that need debunking, once and for all.

The rest of this article seeks to do just that – it's a sort of primer on what ambergris is, what it isn't, its use in perfumery, its smell and properties, and the low-down on the ethics and legalities surrounding the trade and use of ambergris. I also include a list of attars, oils, and fragrances whose compositions feature ambergris (either real or synthetic) in a prominent or even starring role.

So, let's get started. What is ambergris exactly? Or rather, what is it *not*?



Image: Fotalia / tanycya

Ambergris is not whale vomit

Ambergris is not whale vomit. Neither is it, as some members of my own family believe, whale sperm (thanks, *Dad*).

It is actually a waste product from the small intestine of the sperm whale that is excreted from the anus along with its poo.

Here's how ambergris is formed:

The sperm whale (a massive mammal) will typically eat up to a ton of squid and other sea creatures a day. The squid beaks, pens, and other indigestible detritus will build up in one of the whale's four stomachs until it becomes an irritant, whereupon the whale will vomit most of it up. However, some of these beaks and indigestible materials pass through into the intestinal tract.

Once in the intestinal tract, ambergris begins to form around the squid beaks and other detritus. Because the intestinal tract is really only designed to hold liquid feces and slurry, the whale's body produces a soft, waxy material to wrap around the beaks and protect the intestinal tract from the sharp edges.

This material is thought to be made up of a mixture of ambrein, a fatty cholesterol-type material responsible for the odor of ambergris, bile duct excretions (epicoprostanol), gut effluvia, and liquid feces, which build up over time to form a solid lump of material called a **coprolith**. Over time, the pressure from liquid feces hitting this solid lump of hard material builds up, finally propelling the ambergris to be excreted along with the (normal) liquid slurry.

That is, if the whale is large enough. In some cases, smaller whales are unable to pass the ambergris, so the mass continues to build until it tears the rectum, causing the whale to die and the ambergris to be released into the ocean.

In other words, ambergris is the result of either a massive poo or a violent death caused by a massive poo.

It takes time (and seawater) to make good ambergris

When ambergris is freshly excreted, it is soft, black, and dung-like in both shape and odor. In its fresh state, it is practically useless as a perfumery ingredient.

Ambergris bobs around in the open ocean for 10, 15, even 20 years before washing ashore. During this time, it is bleached into its familiar grey-white appearance. The seawater effectively cures and weathers the ambergris, turning it into the hard, waxy substance that is so prized in perfumery. Washed ashore, it will often bake and cure further under the sun, and may even take on the mineralic smell of the sand or stones with which it mixes.

Amber ≠ Ambergris

There is some confusion over the terms amber and ambergris – and this confusion goes all the way back to the Middle Ages! The word “amber,” which comes from the Arabic word “anbar,” was the word used in Middle English (Anglo-Saxon language) to describe ambergris. But at around the same time, the word “amber” evolved in the Romance languages (Latin, French) to mean amber *resin*, specifically the hard, yellow

tree resin that was washing ashore along the Baltic coast at the time. Since both ambergris and the amber resin were both egg-sized lumps of material washing up on beaches, it is easy to see why people confused amber with ambergris.

To confuse things even further, the people of the Middle Ages attempted to distinguish them by color, hence amber resin was originally known as “ambre jaune” (yellow amber) and ambergris as, well, “ambre gris” (grey amber), thus-called because of its greyish-whitish cast. In other words, our ancestors thought amber and ambergris were part of the same genus.

Of course nowadays everyone understands that ambergris and amber are *not* from the same family. Here are the main points of comparison:

- Ambergris is of *animal* origin (a sperm whale); amber is of *vegetal* origin (a Baltic pine tree).
- Ambergris has a low burning point (a heated needle passes through it easily); amber has a high burning point (200C+)
- Ambergris is porous, opaque, waxy, lighter than water (it floats); amber is hard, transparent, and heavier than water (it sinks)
- Ambergris can be used directly in perfumery through tincturing; amber resin is *not* used directly in perfumery because it does not produce its own essential oil*

*There *is* a fossilized amber resin oil produced through the process of dry distillation, whereby the amber resin is burned, producing a smoky, tarry-smelling oil. This is NOT an essential oil of amber, but a by-product of burning. **Fossilized amber oil**, when used in a perfume composition, produces a dark, smoky, balsamic effect, and must be dosed very carefully in order not to overwhelm the other notes. It is sometimes called black amber, and is used in **SHL's Black Gemstone**, for instance.

Amber in modern perfumery is therefore a fantasy composition rather than an actual material. It is an abstract idea of warm, honeyed, sweet, and resinous flavors rendered by a combination of labdanum (rockrose extract), vanilla, benzoin, and sometimes copal resin. Ambergris itself may have been used in the place of labdanum, but that is no longer the case.

It is legal to buy and sell ambergris in most countries

In most countries, it is perfectly legal to buy and sell ambergris.

CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species) is the international body that governs, among other things, the trade and use of ambergris. Since 2005, CITES has agreed that ambergris is a “found” material equivalent to flotsam or biological waste like urine and feces, and therefore it is not illegal or unethical to buy and sell lumps of ambergris that wash up on the shore.

However, CITES is not a government and cannot make laws: it’s just an international agreement that states sign up to voluntarily. That means that signatory countries can choose to enact national laws that adhere to the CITES framework...or not. Either way, a national law made by a government will always supersede the authority of the CITES agreement.

So while it is currently perfectly legal to salvage and sell lumps of ambergris that you find on a beach in the European Union, the UK, and New Zealand, it is *illegal* in Australia, where it is strictly considered to be a whale product and therefore protected under the [Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act, 1999](#).

In the US, the legal situation is a little less clear cut. Sperm whales are a protected species under the Endangered Species Act of 1973, which *technically* means it is illegal for anyone to sell, trade, buy, or otherwise profit from ambergris (because it is a by-product of an endangered species).

However, enforcement of this act is extremely lax in America, and natural perfumers buy and use natural ambergris in their perfumes without fear of indictment by the Federal authorities. The general line of thought in America is that since ambergris is a found, salvaged item like driftwood or other beach detritus, and not the product of hunting or cruelty to the whale by a human, then it’s perfectly ok to sell, buy, and use it.

In other words, American authorities basically agree with the CITES view of ambergris but just haven’t put it into writing yet.

Legalities aside, the ambergris world is still pretty dodgy

There is great secrecy in the business of buying and selling ambergris, especially at

the top levels where huge international companies, middlemen, money, and top-secret perfume formulas are involved.

Pat Lillis has no idea where his lumps of ambergris actually end up because he sells mainly to anonymous middlemen who do not reveal the name of their clients. He sells a lot of ambergris to the Middle East but he doesn't know whether it is then used by **Amouage** or **Rasasi**, or even if it ends up being used in perfume at all. It might end up in a glass display case for all he knows.

If ambergris is legal almost everywhere, then why all the secrecy?

Partly because big companies like Chanel and Guerlain don't like to talk about their materials and formulas, full stop. When Christopher Kemp was writing "Floating Gold: A Natural (& Unnatural) History of Ambergris", **he said it close to impossible** to find anyone in the commercial perfume industry willing to talk to him.

Pat Lillis confirms this, telling me that he once broached the subject of selling ambergris to a mid-level Chanel executive but was shut down almost immediately. They simply do not want to talk about it.

In the case of Chanel, there may be a good legal reason for all this hush-hush. Although Chanel perfumes for the European and Asian markets are manufactured in France, all the perfumes destined for the North American market are made in New Jersey, and technically, in America, ambergris is still viewed legally as a by-product of an endangered species and therefore illegal. Chanel is therefore in an awkward position – it has one foot in a country where ambergris is perfectly legal and the other in a country where it is not. If Chanel uses real ambergris, then it has to be quiet about it. Which makes it more likely, therefore, that it does *not*.

For others, price may be the reason for secrecy. Middlemen for Middle-Eastern buyers don't want to reveal to anyone how much they are paying per gram. They want prices to remain stable at around \$10 per gram for the low quality, black ambergris and \$20 per gram for superior grade white ambergris. In truth, prices fluctuate more wildly than this, because some buyers will pay more for a very rare, or old piece, and because some buyers don't know what they're doing and will accidentally spend too much money on a poor piece of ambergris. But in general, people don't want other people to know how much they're paying for their ambergris.

As you might imagine, this level of secrecy can reach insane levels. **The ambergris world can often resemble a James Bond movie**, with code names, shady

middlemen, and even experts who appear on the scene one day with one name, and then reappear the next year with a completely different name.

Beach-cast ambergris is fine: ambergris hacked out of a whale's gut is NOT

There was an event where a 30-ton male sperm whale washed up dead on a beach in [Holland in early 2013, with 83 kilograms of ambergris](#) found lodged in its rectum. The ecological NGO Ecomare oversaw the process of dissecting the dead whale and the Dutch Government oversaw the selling off of the ambergris, the largest portion of which was bought by Ajmal, the Indian attar company that sells to a primarily Middle-Eastern market.

But there's quite the stigma attached to ambergris that has been hacked out of a whale's gut rather than salvaged from a beach (beach-cast). First of all, it's really no good. Ambergris hacked out is low quality, because the fresh, soft black mass has not had the chance to float in the ocean, curing and maturing into white or grey ambergris.

Second, it is ethically dodgy because the process of hacking open a whale is often done in an uncontrolled way. Usually, CITES officers are not on site to confirm that no animal cruelty has taken place or indeed if the mammal was alive or dead at the time. In the Dutch case, the authorities *were* careful to control and monitor the hacking process, so that it could later make economic use of the ambergris. But normally, people are not so careful about cutting a dead or dying whale open.

Ambergris hacked out of a freshly opened whale gut is therefore seen as a bit dodgy, not to mention low quality and barely useable in perfumery. Most reputable ambergris dealers and middleman therefore prefer to stay away from ambergris obtained in this manner.

But ambergris-laundering might be a thing

When Pat Lillis was approached by a friend about a distinctively-shaped piece of

ambergris, he had the sneaking suspicion that he had seen this particular piece of ambergris before. After searching through Google images, he stumbled across photos from the Dutch haul (mentioned above) featuring a piece of ambergris that looked suspiciously like the piece he had just approached about. Naturally, he declined the offer to have anything to do with that piece of ambergris, telling his friend that he suspected that it had been removed from a stranded whale rather than beach cast, and would therefore be of no interest to his clients.

In other words, in a business as murky as ambergris, there's ample room for ambiguity. Unethical sellers or any links along an ambergris chain could be tempted to pass hacked-out ambergris (from beached, dying, or dead whales) off as beach cast ambergris in an effort to increase their credibility and therefore value - the ambergris equivalent of money laundering, if you will. When people like Pat Lillis trade in ambergris, they are largely trading on their own reputation, and in this game, one poor decision can destroy a reputation that's been built up over years.

Ambergris is rare in sperm whales so hunters don't kill them for it

Ambergris is formed in the intestinal tract of 1% of male sperm whales. That's 1 in a 100 sperm whales. In other words, it doesn't really make sense for hunters to go out and try to kill sperm whales to harvest their ambergris because the sheer odds of finding it make it a losing economic proposition. And in fact, the incidence of killing sperm whales purely for their ambergris *is* very low, and those who do try it are, I feel safe in saying,...morons.

This goes a long way in explaining why CITES and most countries regard the trade in ambergris as legally and ethically ok – it is flotsam that washes up on shore rather than something that the sperm whale is killed for.

But fresh, black ambergris *can* be turned into the white stuff....

No mystery here – if you have a lump of fresh, black ambergris (which will look and

smell like waxy dung), then you can cure it with seawater yourself until it turns white. However, and this is a big caveat, you have to know what you're doing (it takes a few months and many changes of seawater a day) and it will never take on the depth and complexity of a piece of ambergris that has been bobbing around the ocean for two decades.

More importantly, curing a piece of ambergris yourself runs perilously close to doctoring a piece for sale, to bump up its value. If a buyer knows what he's looking for, then a simple test with a hot needle will tell everything about the quality and ageing of a piece beyond the dusty grey-white outer shell. It is interesting to experiment with aging black ambergris, but we are decades away from being able to sell it in the same price category as genuine beach-combed ambergris.

Ambergris is used in perfumery in one of two ways

1. As a fixative

Ambergris is a superlative fixative that gives a halo-like glow to the finished perfume. It deepens the impact of all the other notes in a composition and extends the perfume's tenacity on skin. Think of it like blowing on a fading fire – one breath reviving the hot red brilliance of the coals.

2. As the primary note

Ambergris has a very complex scent profile which depends on the type and grade used (see below for more specific information), but it is not very easy to define. Some perfumes focus on capturing the more tangible facets of ambergris scent profile, such as salty, marine, sweet, tobacco-like, earthy, or even dusty vanilla-paper facets.

A good rule of thumb for figuring out if a perfume has real ambergris in it or not is to define **the role of the ambergris in the overall composition**.

If ambergris is used as a fixative in the base of the perfume and is not the main note being emphasized, then a synthetic ambergris replacer is normally used

in the place of real ambergris.

Ambroxide, sold under the trade names of Ambroxan and Cetalox, is a synthesized material that is almost identical in chemical make-up to ambrein, the fatty, cholesterol-like component of ambergris responsible for its odor.

Ambroxide mimics the fixative properties of ambergris perfectly, is cheap to use, of consistent and replicable quality, and very easy to scale up for mass production. It makes no sense to use real ambergris if all you need it for is its fixative properties deep down in the basenotes.

If ambergris is to be the main feature of the fragrance, then it makes sense to use real ambergris.

Although ambroxide (ambroxan) is a near chemically identical replacement for the fixative properties of ambergris (complete with its dry, salty, warm texture), it does not come close to the real material itself when smelled alone. Sometimes, when overdosed, as in **Dior Sauvage**, it can even smell abrasive and unpleasant.

Natural ambergris itself smells warm, organic, nuanced, so when ambergris is the sole focus of the perfume, ambroxide is a wholly unsatisfactory stand in for the real thing.

There are a few alternatives, though, if ambergris is to play a starring role in a perfume and a perfumer can't or won't use the real stuff. **Ambergris T. Olifacc**, an IFF-made synthetic replacer for ambergris, is one of a number of higher-quality synthetics that can stand up to closer inspection when the scent of ambergris, rather than its fixative qualities, is important in a scent. It's a valid choice for perfumers if they need to use a synthetic and have it smell reasonably close to natural ambergris.

As a general rule of thumb, real ambergris is used mostly by natural perfumers, small indie perfumers, and Middle-Eastern attar makers. Think small batch production - small quantities of oils, tinctures, and essences that are not being produced on a mass scale.

There are exceptions, of course. Some natural perfumers like **Hiram Green** will not use ambergris because they do not use any animal by-products at all, and that

includes ambergris, even if it is salvaged from a beach. And some commercial, mass produced fragrances such as **Guerlain's Encens Mythique d'Orient** do use natural ambergris because the overall focus of the perfume depends on real ambergris (wherein the decision to use real ambergris becomes a creative decision rather than a financial/commercial one).



White ambergris, the finest grade of ambergris. Image: Claire Vukcevic



Ambergris with undigested squid beak visible at center. Image: Claire Vukcevic

Ambergris smells like....

The sea. Salt. A harbor at low tide. Poo. Earth. Tobacco. Rocks. Musk. A freshly mucked-out stable. Vanilla milk. Old newspaper.

Ambergris can smell like any and all of these things, depending on the grade (quality) of ambergris, the age of the piece, and the specific micro-environmental conditions surrounding its formation.

Pat Lillis allowed me to smell many lumps of ambergris, and while each piece smelled subtly different from the next, there was a familial odor that linked them all in my mind as ambergris. Generally, the pieces of ambergris fell into one of three categories:

Black Ambergris

The freshest pieces of ambergris I was offered to smell was blackish in color, quite soft, and dung-like. They smelled quite strongly of horse manure mixed with straw and marine bilge. If you have ever mucked out a horse's stable, then you will be familiar with this smell – it is pungent, fecal, but also warm and horsey. It is not at all unpleasant to my nose but it *is* animalic.

These lower grades of ambergris have not been cured as long in the ocean and therefore retain their original poo-like shape, color, and smell. While the very soft specimens are useless to perfumers, Pat Lillis told me that there is great demand in the Arab world for the slightly harder "fresh" specimens which produce a animalistic undertone in attars and blends.

Pat's homemade tincture from black ambergris smelled dank, feral, and slightly dusty or cloying. The smell of the tincture was the least pleasant to my nose.

Grey (Standard) Ambergris

Aged for a good many years in the ocean, grey ambergris has an ashy grey or brownish color, and is hard. I found the greatest range of aromas to be present within this grade of ambergris, with specimens smelling alternately of tobacco, old (yellowing) newspapers, vanilla, bad breath, marine silt, damp earth, harbors at low tide, seaweed, hay, horse hair, books, and warm salt.

Pat's homemade tincture from grey ambergris smelled like many Middle Eastern ambergris attars I had tested previously, including Sweet Blue Amber by Abdul Samad Al Qurashi and Amber by Amouage. The aroma is warm, salty, and halitosis-like. Once the nose adjusts to the slight fecal or bad breath tonalities, the aroma is very pleasant – rich, round, and earthy, with an undercurrent of clean seawater.

White Ambergris

The highest grade of ambergris is, as the name suggests, white. There is little to no actual aroma clinging to the actual specimens besides a hint of sweet dust, dried salt, and something mineralic. Actually, white ambergris smells like anything that's lain on a beach under the sun for a while – dusty, mineralic, faded, and pleasantly "au plein air." It has a silvery driftwood feel, bleached of all color and animal tendencies.

Pat's homemade tincture of white ambergris smelled the most refined out of all three tinctures, but it was also the one with the least variation in nuance. It smelled light, bright, clear, and kind of sweet. A very difficult smell to define other than a subtle

salty-sweet ozone aroma that drifted in and out of the outer field of my perception.

White ambergris is the type prized for its fixative abilities and for its power to magnify all the other notes without imposing its own character on the composition. Smelled on its own, it is a very difficult aroma to “catch” or to define.

Does my perfume contain real ambergris?

Ah, the million dollar question.

If you are wearing a **commercial, mass-produced perfume**, then the answer is:

No, probably not. Most commercial perfume houses do not use real ambergris in their perfumes because:

1. It is a rare and expensive natural ingredient
2. . Specimens of natural ambergris will differ subtly from one to the next, making it difficult for companies to maintain batch consistency especially on a mass production scale, and most importantly;
3. The prized fixative properties of ambergris can be replicated almost exactly with ambroxide (known widely by its brand name, Ambroxan or Cetalox, a lower-quality variant often used in domestic cleaning fluids). Since this is synthesized from clary sage and/or pine, ambroxide is cheap, of non-animal origin, and allows perfumers to achieve 100% perfect consistency from batch to batch.

There are some exceptions to the above.

First of all, some **vintage versions** of current-day commercial fragrances, such as many of the Creeds and the old Dior feminines, probably did contain genuine ambergris oil and in substantial quantities too (examples are discussed below).

However, modern-day versions of these scents almost certainly contain a synthetic ambergris replacer rather than ambergris.

Second, in the rare case of ambergris being chosen to be the main thematic focus of the fragrance rather than just a fixative for the other notes, a commercial perfume house may opt to use real ambergris. One of the rare commercial, mass-produced fragrances **said to be using real ambergris** (not ambroxide) is Encens Mythique d’Orient by Guerlain (discussed in more detail below).

If you are wearing a **Middle-Eastern style attar or concentrated perfume oil**, then the answer is:

Yes, that's probably real ambergris. Not in very cheap attars, but certainly the more expensive, luxurious attars that list ambergris as a note *will* contain real ambergris oil. Culturally speaking, there is a long-held reverence for ambergris both in perfumery and for other uses in the Arab world.

Cultural preferences also come into play: the Middle Eastern customer is much keener than the average Westerner on animalic notes in their perfumes, and thus exhibits a healthy appetite for the darker forms of ambergris, oud, and musks.

In terms of buying power, Middle-Eastern attar companies are the Tesco or Walmart of the ambergris world. Their huge appetite for ambergris means that the middlemen for the big attar companies use their substantial purchasing power to keep the price of ambergris down. These dealers and middlemen often offer lower than market rates, or buy lower grade ambergris to bulk out attars.

If you are wearing a **natural or indie/niche perfume with ambergris as a key focus**, then the answer is:

Yes, if the perfumer says they use real ambergris. Some indie perfumers use real ambergris tinctures in their perfumes, and some do not. Some perfumers tincture real ambergris in their labs but do not use it in their perfumes, for various reasons including creative decisions, expense, time, consistency, and scaling up issues.

But if they say they use real ambergris, then believe them. Natural and indie perfumers are used to making everything by hand, from the bottle labels right down to the tinctures and essences they use in the perfumes themselves. Ambergris is really no different – it can be obtained legally and safely through several reputable companies that sell online (such as [Celtic Ambergris](#) and [Ambergris.co.nz](#)), and then tintured in their workshops using ethanol or perfumer's alcohol. Some perfumers, such as [Mandy Aftel](#) also grind the ambergris into dust before tincturing, although most leave the lumps of ambergris to dissolve in the alcohol on their own. The process is not complicated, and ambergris is a stable product.

Economies of scale also facilitate the use of natural ambergris in indie and natural perfumery. Natural and indie perfumes are usually very expensive, with perfumers citing the cost of materials as a prime reason – but fans who are passionate about high quality materials are willing to pay. Small batches using expensive ambergris will

be costed out, marked up, and eventually covered by the customer, thus allowing natural and indie perfumers to work with real ambergris (if they so wish).

Even the problem of **consistency and replicability of ambergris** becomes an asset when translated to the smaller-batch production of natural and indie perfumers. Batch inconsistencies are actually prized in the indie perfume community, because the value to the customer lies in *uniqueness*. When people buy natural or indie perfumes, they are buying into those small inconsistencies as enthusiastically as when they buy a hand-crafted scarf whose label states that “this is a natural wool product and variations may occur.”

Here is a list of interesting examples of ambergris perfumes and attars. Some of them contain real ambergris, some do not, but they all are examples of perfumes that attempt to capture some facet of the mysterious, glowing beauty of ambergris.

Single-Focus Ambergris: The Baseline

Anyone interested in ambergris would do well to order samples of some single-focus ambergris oils and tinctures, to establish a baseline of how ambergris smells in isolation.

For a high-quality **tincture**, order a few drops from **La Via de Profumo**. Dominique Dubrana, or Abdes Salaam Attar as he is more commonly known, is a highly reputable and respected perfumer that makes and sells his own tinctures, attars, and spray perfumes using only natural ingredients.

In particular, I recommend his **Santal Ambergris**, a blend of two tinctures; sandalwood and ambergris. It’s an interesting exercise because it is a completely equal, 50:50 game between two halves – the sandalwood and the ambergris. After an initial blast of perfumer’s alcohol, Dubrana’s signature Mysore sandalwood comes first to the fore, with that particular lactic twang that is both arid and creamy at the same time. It has a nutmeg-brown spiciness to it that is deeply pleasing. It’s interesting that a traditional base note such as sandalwood still lies on top of ambergris, which only emerges once all of the nutty, savory sandalwood has burned off. The ambergris only becomes evident in a subtle way, towards the end. In this form, it smells like salted caramel and gives a burnished, warm glow to the skin.

For **attars**, there are several great single-focus options.



Amouage Amber is not amber at all but ambergris. This attar is incredibly earthy and stale, like a clod of earth freshly dug up beside a marina where the carcasses of several marine mammals are rotting slowly in the sun. There is a clean dung-like facet to the aroma, but it is only slightly fecal, because it is the wet, salty marine soil smell that dominates. It smells as pleasant as a freshly-mucked-out stable, complete with clean earth, warm clean straw, and the lingering traces of horse dung. Later on, other nuances drift into the picture, notably aromatic sandalwood, and a dry, papery vanilla tone that reminds me of the pages of old, decaying books whose pages have dried up over time.



Majid Iterji Ambergris Grade I is an interesting attar because it attempts to capture the sweet, mineralic qualities of white ambergris, which in and of itself has a rather

elusive, hard-to-define aroma. The attar does not initially smell of ambergris (of any grade), but of fresh, bright lemon and soapy fruits. Later on, it exhibits a bright, sunny “amber resin” facet with a side of salt and light tobacco. Tinctures made from the finest, grade I specimen of white ambergris (very aged) do smell similar to this: light, sunny, very subtle, almost to the point of not carrying its own scent apart from a trace of sweet, ambery resin.



Abdul Samad Al Qurashi Sweet Blue Amber is a very true interpretation of grey or brown (standard) ambergris. It is very funky and halitosis-like at the start, but it eventually mellows out into a warm, salty, skin-like scent that is very sensual in an organic way. I like to layer this under certain Western scents like Shalimar or Mitsouko to give their notes a fuzzy, warm radiance and a funky animal touch that is missing from the modern versions.

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Independent, Natural & Artisanal Ambergris Perfumes



House of Matriarch Orca is a beautiful, sexed-up lump of silver driftwood that's been rubbed all over with honey and left to bake in the sun for ten years on a beach until it develops a patina of salt crystals. The opening is enticingly dry and smoky, with charred woods and a crispy leather facet that reads like crushed seashells or dried seaweed (briefly reminding me of the dark, salty leather in HoM's wonderful Blackbird, or Black No. 1 as it's now known).

Choya Loban, a type of Indian frankincense, adds a resinous dryness that works very well with the brief hit of bitter orange to introduce the warm, salty ambergris that dominates the scent. Christi Meshell, the perfumer behind House of Matriarch, is well-known for her deft use of naturals and her witchy-hippy aesthetic, and both these sides are showcased perfectly in Orca.

The perfume uses a natural tincture of ambergris that Christi herself produced using a large and rare vintage piece of ambergris sourced from New Zealand. The drydown last forever, as befits a high dosage of natural ambergris, a dry veil of sparkling beach resins, salt, and spicy woods that is only very faintly sweet. I can imagine that on the slightly sweaty skin of a beach girl or boy, this stuff would be the sex bomb to end all sex bombs.



Aftelier Parfum Privé is exactly the perfume a natural perfumer makes for herself when she gets a hold of a \$10,000, 1kg lump of white ambergris. In order to honor this rare find, Mandy Aftel tintured the ambergris for months and then added three other equally expensive and luscious raw materials, namely osmanthus absolute, orange flower absolute, and ambrette seed absolute, all of which also cost \$10,000 per kilo, with a small quantity of 100-year old Mysore sandalwood to smooth over the gaps. The result is a triumph of natural perfumery, with a clear progression between the floral notes – a pure orange flower melting into the dark apricot leather and tea of osmanthus – before reaching a golden, salty pool of warmth in the base.

The ambergris is present in more than holistic doses here, but it does not exert its own character too strongly – in other words, it does not have an aroma of its own. Instead, it infuses the fruit and the florals with a fatted, 3D glow, exaggerating and projecting their form like a movie reel onto a massive cinema screen.

It also has the effect of “ageing” the osmanthus and orange blossom with a salty, woody patina, darkening their golden, fruity tone until they appear weathered, like fruit and flowers captured in syrup and stored for centuries. Mandy Aftel seems to have found the connective tissue between these three, mega-expensive ingredients, and that connective tissue is leather. The dry, ozonic leathery aspects of the ambergris emphasizes the suede edge of the osmanthus, and together they shrivel the orange blossom up into a smoky, twisted piece of orange-scented leather. Parts of the composition read to me as a medicinal syrup of fruits and flowers over a dark, smoky tea.

It is a beautiful, touching piece of natural perfumery with a complex texture that

recalls vintage siren perfumes of the past. But it also has a seriousness about it. If a perfume has a human form, then Parfum Prive is a grave little Madonna, perhaps a Monica Bellucci, poured into a tight satin dress, acres of creamy flesh spilling over the sides and straining at the material.



Francesca Bianchi *Sex and the Sea* is a good example of how perfumers can take use ambergris (or, as in this case, Cetalex, a synthetic ambergris replacer) to twist familiar notes into strikingly different shapes. It is worth knowing that although Francesca tinctures lumps of ambergris herself, she used Cetalex here in order to achieve a uniform, replicable result across batches. She also told me that achieving consistency while using real ambergris is a real challenge when scaling up production.

Sex and the Sea is, nominally, a stab at the tropical seaside genre of fragrance. But the dry, urinous, salt-encrusted ambergris note transforms all the usual markers of tropicana (pineapple, coconut, lactones) into something far less comfortable than the creamy, sweet sun-tan oil smell we expect to smell.

Imagine a pile of dried, salted pineapple mixed in with discarded coconut husks and ancient sea tackle, ropes, and flotsam washed up on the shore of an island somewhere, and this is what you smell. The heap of materials is dry and crusted over with salt, and if you get close enough you will notice a searing smell of old seagull piss, dry and ureic rather than honeyed and wet. Definitely one to sample if you're a fan of challenging perfumes that do animalic/sexy in a metallic, harsh, salty way.



Slumberhouse Sådanne is fruity ambergris lemonade and therefore a lot of fun. It features luridly pink, syrupy berry notes (an overdose of rosy damascones) over a grungy ambergris accord that comes off like a cross between a harbor at low tide and bad breath. What ambergris does for Sådanne is to add a layer of pure filth that scuffs up the glassy pink shininess of the fruit. A flinty white wine accord cuts through the murk of the fruit and ambergris. It's quirky and intelligent, and a breeze to wear.

Here, Josh Lobb used **Ambergris T. Olifacc**, an IFF-made synthetic replacer for ambergris, although like Francesca Bianchi, he actually tinctures lumps of ambergris in his lab. He chooses to use a synthetic ambergris replacer instead of his own (real) ambergris tinctures for reasons of replicability – the two tinctures he has smell very different to each other, with one smelling more civety and the other more vanillic. It would be difficult, therefore, to attain the consistency of smell he was going for in the base of Sådanne with the tinctures, whereas the replacer offers 100% consistency.

Niche & Designer Ambergris Perfumes



Les Nez L'Antimatière is a minimalistic perfume that convinces on the basis of its sexy, salty animal afterglow alone – the main body of the scent is barely perceptible at all. It made from a simple mixture of synthetic musk and real ambergris tincture, according to the brand's director. Real or not, the ambergris note in this perfume is as close to the smell of an ambergris tincture as I've ever smelled in a commercial perfume. Its total lack of sweetness and plushness is convincing. It smells like a hot grey stone baking on a beach somewhere.

Not everyone will be able to perceive the ambergris in this perfume, though. First of all, most people are anosmic to at least one of the types of synthetic musk molecules used in perfumes, and if you can't smell the musk in L'Antimatière, it may also block your ability to perceive other notes such as the ambergris. Second, many people have never smelled an ambergris tincture of any kind, and might easily mistake the ambergris for something else.

To my nose, though, this smells like a big musk paired with a very true-to-life smelling white or grey ambergris tincture. The ambergris note is dusty, mineralic, and has bitter hay or tobacco nuances to it. It is almost harsh, but in a cool, outdoorsy way. If you are a parent and have ever hugged your kid when they've come indoors after hours of playing football, then you'll know what I mean when I say it smells like "the outdoors" on a child's hair.

It's quite an alien smell but there's something perversely warm and human about it too. I can imagine an androgynous girl or guy slinging this on with their black leather jacket and a whole eyeliner's worth of attitude before killing it at a club. True to the nature of ambergris – or Ambroxide, whichever this is – it has a brusque, salty

radiance that seduces at a 50-foot radius.



Maitre Parfumeur et Gantier Ambre Dore ends up in the same silky amber drydown of its brother, Ambre Precieux, but before it gets there, it does one of the most convincing impressions of black ambergris I've ever smelled in a commercial niche fragrance. In the topnotes, smoky styrax resin interacts with oud, herbs, and aromatics to produce a volatile, animalic bitterness that is almost nauseating – the key ingredient being a heavy marine bilge note contributed by the ambergris.

I don't know if real ambergris was used in this formula (probably not), but somehow the interplay between the oud, ambergris, and aromatic herbs and resins forms an accurate picture of how the funkier, softer pieces of black ambergris smell to my nose, namely, full of marine silt, chocolate-brown oil slicks on the greasy sand at low tide, horse dung, black truffles, and earth. The closest I could describe it would be a lump of black truffle shaved into brine.

Definitely worth trying for the opening half hour, if you're a fan of the funkier grades of ambergris. Unfortunately, the striking part of Ambre Dore does not last long before smoothing out into the standard sweet (fantasy) amber base of labdanum, vanilla, and benzoin.



Hermes Eau des Merveilles is a wholly artistic representation of the *idea* of ambergris in the way that Bois des Iles is a representation of Mysore sandalwood – it doesn't make any claims to verisimilitude. But in fact, through a clever drawing together of notes that white ambergris does feature, such as salt, dry bleached woods, and a certain transparent sparkle, Eau des Merveilles is actually a pretty creditable ambergris fragrance.

In particular, it completely nails the dry, sweet, warm saltiness and the silvery driftwood texture of ambergris, and its only real embellishment is that orange note. Eau des Merveilles (am I the only one who thinks of Melville and hence Moby Dick when I see that name?) is a great casual beachy perfume, and like real ambergris serves as nature's magnifying glass to one's own sweaty, salty glow after a long day at the beach.



Profumum Ambra Aurea: Often mentioned as a good example of ambergris in perfumery, I find little to recommend it in the dull, waxy countenance of this mainly vegetal amber. However, I do recommend Ambra Aurea to the timid explorers among us who might prefer to approach ambergris through an amber back door rather than head on. Ambra Aurea features a smooth, almost buttery fantasy amber accord over a dry, salty ambergris base. Ambroxan clearly stands in for the ambergris component here, and together with the cedary incense note, helps create a raspy counterpart to the maple syrup sweetness of the amber.



Diorescence (Vintage) is the subject of a **wonderful, perhaps apocryphal story** told by Luca Turin to Chandler Burr in his book, *The Emperor of Scent*, and true or not, it is so good it bears repeating here.

In 1969, Guy Robert was asked by Dior to go and inspect a lump of ambergris to see if it was worth procuring. After rubbing his hands over the sticky, brownish lump, Robert went to wash his hands in the WC. The combined scent of the ambergris and the floral soap he used was so intoxicating to him that he later phoned the auction manager to find out the name of the soap they used. hilariously, the soap was a cheap knock-off of a Dior perfume! Robert reconstructed the scent in his head using real ambergris oil and a common Dior mixed floral base, probably the same one that went into Miss Dior and Diorissimo, earlier Dior feminines.

The result: a pungent green floral chypre with a salty, animalic glow that illuminates all the other elements in the composition. The original was simultaneously earthy, green, sweet, salty, and creamy. Luca Turin used the words "come hither" about its slightly slutty undertone, but it is actually very easy to wear compared to modern

animalic perfumes that shock with their muscular use of cumin and briny musks.

Unfortunately, Dioressence was changed and its formula cheapened successively over the years, and now it is a polite, soapy green floral chypre that's neither here nor there. Certainly, at this point, an ambergris-free zone.



Guerlain Encens Mythique d'Orient is an incredibly odd but engaging perfume. Belying at least two-thirds of its name, it's not particularly oriental and it doesn't have a strong incense character. However, the "Mythique" is on point, because this almost certainly contains a quantity of the mythical ambergris.

Opening on a steam-pressed barrage of starch and aldehydes, you'd be forgiven for thinking you're in a Chinese laundry. There is a brief glimpse of a rich rose and sour oud wood, but this is whipped away fairly quickly, leaving you enough time to wallow in all those fizzing, airborne "white shirt" particles floating in the air, stuffed to such density that it almost takes on a physical form in front of your nose. As metallic as a hot wire brush, you can almost feel the aldehydes clogging your lungs like cotton fluff.

When the starch cloud calms down, it reveals a rich, salty "fatty" ambergris note that turns the lights up on the perfume. The effect of the ambergris in this perfume is like the glare of hard, speckled sunlight on water – so bright you have to half-close your eyes to perceive it. It lacks all the curvy hallmarks of a true oriental – any vanilla or amber here is minimal. But it employs the hay-like bitterness of saffron and the animalic pungency of ambergris so deftly that it's hard to deny its allure. Clearly, a decision was made here to showcase ambergris in all its golden, resinous weirdness, and it's all the better for it.



Creed Angélique Encens is on this list not only because it is a great example of how ambergris can be used to give heavy materials like incense a salty, ethereal glow, but because it's important to have a **Creed** on this list. Creed is one of the most oft-mentioned houses for the use of ambergris in its bases, with many citing **Green Irish Tweed** as an excellent representation.

Due to the scarcity, expense, and scaling-up problems in using real ambergris oil, it is very likely that Creed now uses synthetic ambergris replacers in their perfumes. Creed is a big company and sells a lot of perfume, so certainly this argument makes most sense.

However, that is not to say that Creed never used real ambergris in their perfumes in the past when its use was perhaps more economically feasible or production was smaller. Angelique Encens almost certainly contained some real ambergris before it was (cruelly) discontinued, because its composition relies on the distinctive nature of ambergris to give the perfume its characteristic golden, salted sparkle.

On balance, it's probably more accurate to speculate that because it was a mass-produced, commercially-available perfume (at the time), the composition relied on (a small amount of) real ambergris mixed with (a larger quantity of) a synthetic ambergris replacer. Whatever the truth behind Creed's use of real ambergris in this composition, it was likely discontinued because it was proving difficult to source the right raw materials for it. Whether that was the sandalwood or the ambergris, I doubt we'll ever know. Still, if you ever have the chance to sample Angelique Encens, do not hesitate.



Juliette Has a Gun Not a Perfume proves that there is truth in advertising after all; Not a Perfume is indeed *not* a perfume but rather Ambroxan mixed with perfumer's alcohol. (Mind you, they sell it for €120 for a 100ml bottle, so the joke's certainly on *someone*). Not a Perfume could be a good perfume to try if you want to smell Ambroxan in isolation without investing in a perfumer's apprentice kit. As a perfume, it's something you might wear for others rather than for yourself, because close up, it smells of little else than a low-key, ambery note with some muskiness to it. Add a hair more clean woodiness, and it might as well be diluted Iso E Super. Despite not being a proper perfume, Not A Perfume has a room-slaying radiance that brings all the boys to the yard. If you need spray-on sexual confidence, this might be worth a try.

Attars – Ambergris Blends (Mixed, Not Single Focus)



ASAQ Amber Jewels is an attar that lovers of amber and ambergris in fragrances owe themselves to smell at least once in their life, if only to establish some kind of benchmark for quality and complexity. The notes for this fragrance list only ambergris, but I smell a lot of amber in the later stages of the scent too. The opening is pure marine air, thick, pungent, and hyper-clean like disinfectant - but oddly pleasurable to the nose, not challenging or rough in the slightest. When other balsamic notes such as labdanum come in, the attar becomes tarrier, then finally sweet and salty, with a rather sensual skin-like finish.



ASAQ Jewel Blend features an aged, animalic Hindi oud over an ambergris-amber base. I found it challenging and overly-animalic to begin with, but with time have come to appreciate this blend as one of the best from the house of ASAQ. After the hot, sour aged oud settles, the nose begins to pick out the iodine warmth of grey

ambergris. The transition in Jewel from the warm, sweet-sour, intensely woody, dusty, ancient-smelling oud accord to the warm, salty ambergris one is seamless – it doesn't miss a step and it holds your hand the whole way through.



ASAQ Royal Amber is primarily ambergris but with a small amount of sweet labdanum resin added later for sweetness and body. It is unabashedly medicinal at first, with a clear iodine facet. Iodine is present in both disinfectant and sea water, so it makes sense that there are iodine-like aspects to ambergris. While the iodine doesn't ever completely disappear, it is joined by the more attractive facets of natural ambergris, which is to say, notes of salt, marsh, and sweet marine air. Later on, the attar begins to take on a sticky, resin-y, sweet, and almost leathery aroma, leading me to believe that labdanum is used in the base. It has a light skankiness that may come from the combination of salt and leathery, caramellic resin.



Royal Amber Spirit AAA is the top of the line when it comes to ambergris-dominant attars in the ASAQ stable. Compared to Royal Amber and Amber Jewels (both of which are excellent), Royal Amber Spirit is immediately heavier, denser, more complex, and more ambery. Although there is that raw, salt-sweet, marine air quality to the beginning - the ambergris oil - it is almost immediately joined by a thick, balsamic, dense amber accord that feels luxurious and rich. It maintains the same salty-sweet ambergris feel all the way through, but the effect is pleasurably muffled or blanketed by an almost waxy layer of dense amber. I sense some spices swimming around in this murky, monolithic amber accord - dusty, sweet spice like saffron, which adds to a sort of leathery-warm-spicy feel here.



Amouage Molook is a paean to the glories of two of the stinkiest raw materials in all of perfumery, namely, ambergris and Syoufi oud (a fine but extremely animalic type of Indian oud oil). The Syoufi oud is all there in its creamy, sheep cheese-y, fetid feet glory. But it's the warm, animalic ambergris that really shines in this attar. It has the fetid marine stink of the softer, darker types of ambergris, the type that still bears some resemblance to the whale dung it started out as. Its fecal warmth acts as a magnifying glass for the oud, and together they form an intimately musky, animal-fur-like feel that gives this attar depth and range.

Sultan Pasha Jardin d'Borneo is a pungent white floral that eventually softens and melts into ambergris oil. In the base, this attar takes on a glowing, creamy vintage vibe, when the pungent green chypre part mixes with the animalic ambergris to produce a lactonic green floral with a leer on its face. In fact, Jardin d'Borneo recreates much of the feel of vintage Dioressence, with its ambergris, slight civet undertones, floral soapiness, and green pungency – a feat that is impressive in an

attar.

Sultan Pasha Ambre du Soleil is a beautifully bright, lemony frankincense and bergamot blend over a particularly rugged ambergris. I suspect that the ambergris tincture was made from black or soft ambergris, because there is a softly dung-like aspect to it at first that might seem fecal to some. It may have been boosted by a drop of civet, but mainly it smells like pure ambergris tincture, made from a non-white grade of ambergris. Later on, it develops into a natural, warm marine aroma, with tinges of low tide and earthy, raw tobacco to remind us of its origin. An excellent example of the depth that natural ambergris can add to a blend, serving as an amplifying glass for all the other elements in the mix.



Amouage Badr al Badour is a superb rose-oud with a notable undercurrent of real ambergris. The salty funk of ambergris breathes life into the sour, dry oud mélange from beneath, bequeathing a round sort of warmth that has nothing to do with sweetness. I would describe the base of this attar as opulently rich and golden, and the oud heart as silver or grey.



Amouage Majan is a sort of twin to Molook, except where Molook is a duet between animal Hindi oud and ambergris, Majan is a duet between sandalwood and ambergris. As in Molook, the quality of the ambergris oil used in Majan is sublime – softly fecal, marine, warm, deep, and with tobacco and leather tonalities that add depth and sturdiness. Something about it feels aged, like the pages of an old manuscript, but there is a golden, light sweetness there too. The vintage feel is enhanced by the slight civet-like undertone to the ambergris. Wearing it may remind vintage lovers of ambergris and civet-heavy fragrances from the past such as Joy parfum and Dioressence.

What about you? Have you tried any ambergris-based fragrances or attars that you really like and that I haven't mentioned here? This list is by no means exhaustive. Or if you have tried or own any of these perfumes on my list, would you care to comment on them?

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