

# What does "ambergris" mean?

## Where does the word come from?

Article Number: 249 | Rating: 3.7/5 from 3 votes | Last Updated: Thu, Aug 11, 2011 12:53 PM

Ambergris (Latin: *Ambra grisea*, *Ambre gris*, *ambergrease* or *grey amber*) is a solid, waxy, flammable substance of a dull gray or blackish color produced in the digestive system of and regurgitated or secreted by sperm whales.

Ambergris Caye seemingly got its name from the word "ambergris", which is a somewhat hardened secretion generated in the stomachs of whales. Dr. Sal Mazzullo actually found some ambergris years ago along the shore in San Pedro. It's called "ambergris" because it's amber-like in its hardness and color, and "gris" because it picks up sand as it rolls along the sea bottom, eventually reaching shore in places.

Freshly produced ambergris has a marine, fecal odor. However, as it ages, it acquires a sweet, earthy scent commonly likened to the fragrance of rubbing alcohol without the vaporous chemical astringency. The principal historical use of ambergris was as a fixative in perfumery, though it has now been largely displaced by synthetics.

Ambergris occurs as a biliary secretion of the intestines of the sperm whale and can be found floating upon the sea, or in the sand near the coast. It is also sometimes found in the abdomens of whales. Because the beaks of giant squids have been found embedded within lumps of ambergris, scientists have theorised that the substance is produced by the whale's gastrointestinal tract to ease the passage of hard, sharp objects that the whale might have eaten.

Ambergris is usually passed in the fecal matter. Ambergris that forms a mass too large to be passed through the intestines is expelled via the mouth, leading to the reputation of ambergris as primarily coming from whale vomit.

Ambergris can be found in the Atlantic Ocean and on the coasts of Brazil, Madagascar, the East Indies, The Maldives, China, Japan, India, Australia, New Zealand, and the Molucca islands. Most commercially collected ambergris comes from The Bahamas in the Caribbean, particularly New Providence.

Ambergris is found in lumps of various shapes and sizes, weighing from 15 g (½ oz) to 50 kg (100 pounds) or more. When initially expelled by or removed from the whale, the fatty precursor of ambergris is pale white in color (sometimes streaked with black), soft, with a strong fecal smell. Following months to years of photo-degradation and oxidation in the ocean, this precursor gradually hardens, developing a dark gray or black color, a crusty and waxy texture, and a peculiar odor that is at once sweet, earthy, marine, and animalic. Its smell has been generally described as a vastly richer and smoother version of isopropanol without its stinging harshness.

In this developed condition, ambergris has a specific gravity ranging from 0.780 to 0.926. It melts at about 62 °C to a fatty, yellow resinous liquid; and at 100 °C (212 °F) it is volatilized into a white vapor. It is soluble in ether, and in volatile and fixed oils.

Ambergris is relatively nonreactive to acid. White crystals of a substance called ambrein can be separated from ambergris by heating raw ambergris in alcohol, then allowing the resulting solution to cool.

Ambergris has been mostly known for its use in creating perfume and fragrance much like musk. While perfumes can still be found with ambergris around the world, American perfumers usually avoid it because of legal ambiguities. It was banned from use in many countries in the 1970s, including the United States, because its precursor originates from the sperm whale, which is an endangered species. However, it has been legal since 2005 because of strict monitoring of distributors who ensure that only ambergris that has been naturally washed to shore is sold. Ancient Egyptians burned ambergris as incense, while in modern Egypt ambergris is used for scenting cigarettes. The ancient Chinese called the substance "dragon's spittle fragrance". During the Black Death in Europe, people believed that carrying a ball of ambergris could help prevent them from getting the plague. This was because the fragrance covered the smell of the air which was believed to be the cause of plague.

This substance has also been used historically as a flavouring for food, and some people consider it an aphrodisiac. During the Middle Ages, Europeans used ambergris as a medication for headaches, colds, epilepsy, and other ailments.

- [Natural History Magazine Article: Floating Gold -- The Romance of Ambergris](#)
- [Ambergris - A Pathfinder and Annotated Bibliography](#)
- [On the chemistry and ethics of Ambergris](#)
- [Scientific American Strange but True: Whale Waste Is Extremely Valuable](#)

Posted : Marty Casado - Thu, Aug 11, 2011 9:54 AM. This article has been viewed 18730 times.

Online URL: <https://ambergriscaye.com/help/article.php?id=249>

