

Meet the stars of Mandy Aftel's new book Fragrant: The Secret Life of Scent



Cinnamon

(Ch. 2, "A Taste for Adventure") Cinnamon was the most esteemed of the spices that adventurers brought out of the East, their mysterious origins kept still more exotic by myths that they came from giant birds' nests or trees guarded by bats and vipers. Used by the Egyptians in mummification and burned by the Greeks and Romans in religious rites for its aromatic smoke, cinnamon was so valuable to the Dutch that buying it on the black market or removing a seed from Dutch-occupied Ceylon were crimes

punishable by death. Perfumers value cinnamon for its ability to punctuate the shape of a perfume, especially in combination with floral ingredients.

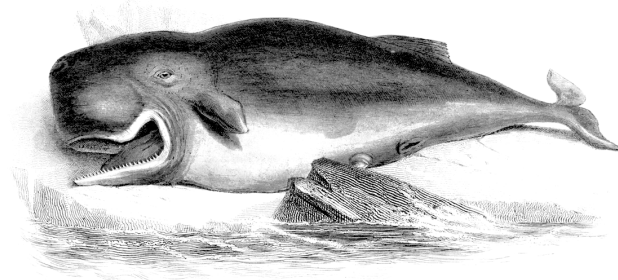
Mint

(Ch. 3, "There's No Smell Like Home") Mint is native the world over, deeply entwined (so to speak!) with our idea of home and our rituals of hospitality, from the mint leaves Hebrew housewives ground underfoot to the cups of mint tea offered as welcome in Morocco to the mints on your hotel pillow. The herb's zingy mentholated freshness made it a hit in toothpaste and chewing gum and spawned an American mint oil industry; a century ago, 90 percent of the world's supply came from within 90 miles of Kalamazoo, MI. The same freshness mints give to sweet and savory foods lends focus to florals and resins in perfume.



Frankincense

(Ch. 4, "Reaching for Transcendence") The first perfume was incense, and frankincense is among the most ancient of incense ingredients. But while we associate it with religious practice, symbolic of the soul aspiring to transcendence, its ritual use probably had a practical origin: the burning of fragrant woods and resins masked the smells of cremation and human and animal sacrifice, older forms of offering. The hardened resin of *Boswellia* trees that grow wild in Oman and other parts of the Middle East, where frankincense is still used for its healthful properties, it has also been studied in the West for its psychoactive properties (it has been shown to relieve depression and anxiety in mice) and for clues to a cure for some cancers.



Ambergris

(Ch. 5, "Curious and Curiouser") In 2006, an Australian couple found what they thought was a stump or giant cyst on the beach; it turned out to be a hunk of ambergris, worth more than a quarter of a million dollars.

A wax-like pathological growth that develops in the stomach and intestines of certain whales, perhaps in response to indigestible irritants in their food, ambergris is expelled as a stinky mass that, as it floats on the waves and dries on the sand over years or decades, evolves into an incomparably sweet, ethereal, faintly musky fragrance. Long prized for its medicinal properties (it was thought to ward off Plague), it is cherished for its ability to "fix" or stabilize a perfume blend.



Jasmine

(Ch., "Seduced by Beauty") "No perfume without jasmine," goes the perfumer's adage. The magic ingredient? Indole, whose hallmark fecal smell overpowers at full strength but turns flowery at low concentrations, lending jasmine the putrid-sweet, sultry-intoxicating nuance that makes it such an aphrodisiac. Because the blossoms are too delicate to survive distillation, until modern solvent extraction was invented jasmine's aromatic essence was harvested by *enfleurage*, the petals laid on glass plates smeared with lard or tallow that captured their volatile elements. Because these were released only a little at a time, the process actually captured more of their perfume than could have been smelled at any given moment of their lives. A wonderful metaphor for beauty, a quality greater than the sum of its parts!