

## The Green Fairy Returns To America

By Julie Zeveloff

Absinthe is a spirit of mythic proportions: it has been blamed for violence, insanity, and bizarre hallucinations--most notably the conjuring of little green fairies. Some even claim it helped drive Vincent van Gogh to suicide.

“Absinthe has always had this strange phenomenon where it’s the victim and the beneficiary of its mystique,” said Robert Lehrman, a lawyer who represents Kübler, a Swiss-based absinthe distiller. “There is something different about it that has helped and hurt it at the same time.”

Now, after nearly a century, Americans have the chance to sample the mischievous green liquor for themselves. Last spring, government officials finally agreed to allow the word “absinthe” on bottle labels, effectively ending a 95-year ban.

Absinthe enthusiasts from Seattle to Boston are thrilled that the spirit has returned to the United States. Most now realize that it does not cause violent rages or visions of green fairies, and while van Gogh did imbibe, the stuff didn’t kill him.

“Absinthe was an important ingredient in some of the earliest cocktails, and it’s been missing in our country since 1912,” said Gwydion Stone, founder of the Wormwood Society, a Seattle-based absinthe aficionados club. Not only are bartenders learning to recreate pre-ban absinthe cocktails, Stone added, but they are also mixing innovative new drinks using the licorice-flavored spirit.

Absinthe originated in Switzerland’s Val de Travers in the late 18th century. It contains a minimum of nine herbs, usually including wormwood, anise and fennel. The resulting pale, lime-green liquor is “a very perfumed spirit with the flavor of anise,” said Ted Breaux, an absinthe researcher and distiller who created Lucid, one brand of absinthe now available in the United States. “It’s slightly sweet, goes down easily and packs quite a punch.”

Though originally consumed as a medicinal stomach-soother, absinthe soon spread through Europe as a popular social lubricant. But the potent liquor was banned throughout much of

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A traditional absinthe drip with slotted spoon and sugar cube. (Photo by Julie Zeveloff)



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The Kübler absinthe distillery in Val de Travers, Switzerland. (Photo courtesy of Peter Karl)

Europe in the early 1900s amid rumors that it caused violence and insanity. The United States followed suit, outlawing absinthe in 1912. Later, the Food and Drug Administration kept absinthe off shelves by banning thujone, a chemical found in wormwood that is toxic in high doses.

There things stood until a few years ago, when several people who were determined to reintroduce the spirit to the United States petitioned the federal Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau. When they pointed out that products with less than 10 parts per million of thujone are considered “thujone-free” by the FDA, the government relented and agreed to allow the term “absinthe” back on bottle labels.

When it is not mixed into cocktails, absinthe is most popularly consumed with sugar cubes melted into it, a concoction dubbed the absinthe drip. The spirit is best consumed carefully, as the alcohol content of most brands hovers around a stinging 60 percent. Distributors say that absinthe is gaining popularity as more bars and liquor stores start to sell it, but it can still be tough to find a bottle, or even an absinthe cocktail, since only a handful of companies currently distribute in the United States.

Quality absinthe can be expensive and time-consuming to produce, distillers said. “The secret of absinthe is not only in the wormwood and the thujone, it’s in the recipe and all the herbs involved,” said Peter Karl, a partner in the Kübler distiller. A bottle of Lucid retails for around \$60, and other brands are similarly priced.

In New York City, where a drink can be had on nearly every street corner, absinthe is relegated to high-end cocktail bars.

“Aside from the classic drip, I think they don’t know what to do with it,” said John Deragon, a bartender at PDT on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, referring to other bars. Deragon has been mixing absinthe recipes, old and new, for the past several months. His repertoire includes some pre-1912 classics, like the Sazerac, a bitter cocktail that was popular in New Orleans in the 1830s, and the Sea Fizz, which calls for egg whites and lemon juice. He is also experimenting with some new combinations of his own, including one kumquat-flavored concoction.

Since absinthe’s herbal flavor is so intense, it can be tricky to incorporate it into a drink. “It’s like having a bright, sharp color,” explained Breaux, who has devoted much of his career to recreating an absinthe that meets federal food and drug guidelines. “It works with some things, and not so well with other things.”

Preparing an absinthe drip is a complicated process compared to mixing a drink or pouring a beer, said Sunita, owner of a Manhattan bar that goes by the same name, and who preferred not to give her last name. It calls for sugar to be melted over a slotted absinthe spoon, which can take several minutes. “It takes a while to prepare, so that time is lost,” she said. At Sunita, an absinthe drip costs \$14.

Is absinthe a passing fad, or will it become a bar-shelf standard? Absinthe makers think that



A billboard welcomes visitors to Val de Travers, Switzerland, the birthplace of absinthe. (Photo courtesy of Peter Karl)



A traditional absinthe fountain can serve large parties. (Photo courtesy of Peter Karl)

by keeping the standards for their product high, they will eventually reestablish the liquor's former popularity.

"We feel the introduction of a product that offers quality will help those in the United States understand why it was so popular in France" before it was outlawed, said Breaux of Lucid. He and other distillers want Americans to know that absinthe is "not green dye in a bottle of vodka."

Sunita agreed. "I think it's here to stay," she said. "People enjoy sipping it. In a cocktail, it's quite delicious."

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