

ARTS

HOW'S YOUR DRINK? by Eric Felten

Absinthe: Fact vs. Fiction

THE LARGE GLASS of absinthe sitting in front of the woman is clearly not her first. It isn't just the slack, unfocused eyes that tell you: Slumped against the banquette, her shoulders droop; listless arms drift away under the plain zinc table; her legs are splayed forward so that the shoes look like they might be on the wrong feet.

Edgar Degas's 1876 painting of Ellen Andr ee at a Paris caf e came to be called "L'Absinthe." It's hardly an advertisement for the greenish liquor—the picture is such a blunt statement of dissipation that when the painting was sold at Christie's in 1892, the London auction crowd hissed it.

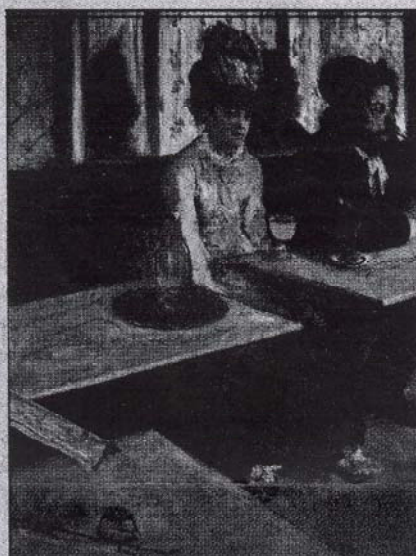
Absinthe, that Belle Epoque-making drink, was indulged by rich and poor alike in France. But the artsy avant-garde most noisily embraced it. Bohemian poets like Verlaine and Rimbaud, Impressionist painters such as Van Gogh and Gauguin: All celebrated the drink as an aid to creativity. Absinthe was "the green fairy," a muse in a bottle. It also helped that it was cheap, so starving artists didn't have to be thirsty artists, too.

The false promise of absinthe inspiration has long fueled the underground appeal of the drink—not unlike the lure of heroin to a generation of jazz musicians who assumed smack would help them play like Charlie Parker. But others are attracted by the self-destructiveness of it all—Van Gogh hacked his ear off while deep in his absinthe cups. And probably the biggest factor in the enduring mystique has been absinthe's quasi-illicit status.

Though it is illegal to sell or import absinthe into the U.S., the drink is not a controlled substance. I asked a Drug Enforcement Agency spokeswoman about absinthe and she said, with a laugh, "We don't have a dog in that fight." At issue is a chemical found in wormwood—thujone—long thought to be the reason for absinthe's reputation as a ticket to the asylum. The chemical is banned under Food and Drug Administration regulations, but FDA spokesman Mike Herndon says that his agency has no say in the regulation of alcoholic beverages. Yet ask the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms why it won't allow absinthe into the U.S., and it says it is simply

enforcing the FDA's ban on thujone.

Is thujone dangerous? Recent research suggests that the chemical cuts the brain's brake lines, leading to runaway synapses. But the amount of thujone in absinthe isn't nearly enough to account for the lurid descriptions of "absinthism" common a century ago. "A large drink of absinthe will produce insensibility, convulsions, ...trembling



"L'Absinthe" by Degas (1876)

Absinthe Drip

- 2 oz Absente (absinthe substitute)
- ice-cold water
- 1 cube sugar

■ Pour the liqueur into a large goblet. Place the sugar cube on a slotted spoon resting across the top of the glass. Slowly drip water onto the sugar, and down into the glass, until the goblet is full. Absinthe, absinthe substitute and plain old pastis will all turn cloudy, or "touche," when combined with water.

Brunelle Cocktail

- 1 oz Absente (absinthe substitute)
- 1 oz fresh lemon juice
- ½ oz sugar syrup (or more, to taste)

■ Shake with ice and strain into a cocktail glass. Or, combine over ice in a highball glass and top it up with soda water.

hands, arms and legs, intense thirst, tingling in the ears, illusions of sight and hearing," an Agriculture Department official told the New York Herald in 1907.

If U.S. rules against absinthe are obscure, the laws on the Continent have not been. France banned the national drink in 1915 in an effort to sober up its absinthe-besotted army. In 1910, Switzerland wrote an explicit absinthe ban into its constitution after a farmer, violently drunk on absinthe and other spirits, murdered his wife and children (includ-

ing an infant). For decades absinthe was fodder for constitutional law classes in Switzerland—the leading example of how their constitution had become bogged down with specifics better suited to statutes. When Switzerland finally undid its ban (the change went into effect in 2004) it was because of an overhaul of the constitution, not any political groundswell from *absintheurs*.

Now that absinthe is legal in Switzerland—as it has been since 1998 in the European Union—a number of distilleries have taken it up.

A Swiss diplomat recently poured a glass of K ubler absinthe for me, and it was something of a surprise. I've never been a huge fan of pastis, the herbal liqueurs such as Pernod and Ricard that filled in for absinthe when the original was banned. Absinthe always had the pronounced taste of anise, but the licorice was balanced with the bitter wormwood. Once the wormwood was banned, the anise monopolized the flavor. The K ubler absinthe finds that herbal balance again and presents a credible representation of a mountain meadow. If drinking pastis is like sucking on a licorice candy, then real absinthe is more akin to a Ricola cough drop.

"How's Your Drink?" does not advocate lawlessness, even when the law is obscure and unclear. So unless you are traveling in Europe, try Absente, a newish absinthe substitute that avoids licorice overkill. The traditional French caf e style is to dribble cold water over a sugar cube and into a glass of absinthe.

Plenty of classic cocktails call for a splash of absinthe, but very few use it as the main spirit. One is the Brunelle Cocktail. It is very simple, which given the complexity of absinthe's herbal flavors is probably why it works: equal parts absinthe and lemon juice with sugar to taste.

Who knows whether absinthe ever had the mind-altering characteristics so often attributed to it (and so sought after by today's bohemian wannabes). There was danger enough in the staggering alcohol content many absinthes once had—nearly twice that of gin or vodka. Down a dozen 150-proof drinks a day and you hardly need wormwood to come to ruin.

Degas, Ma net, Toulouse-Lautrec, Van Gogh and Picasso all depicted absintheurs; and if the paintings are any indication, their subjects were not happy drinkers.

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