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Couvet Journal

Rebirth of the Potion That Made Val-de-Travers Famous

By ELAINE SCIOLINO

COUVET, Switzerland, Nov. 1 — For three years Claude-Alain Bugnon has competed with his wife for space in the unfinished concrete basement of their home here, she to do laundry, he to make absinthe.

Armed with plastic containers of dried herbs, tubs of pharmaceutical ethanol, a homemade still and a secret recipe from a friend's grandmother, Mr. Bugnon has used his skills as an oil refinery technician to produce the powerful herbal elixir long blamed for driving people mad.

In January a new law takes effect in Switzerland aimed at rehabilitating the reputation of absinthe, whose distillation, distribution and sale were banned after an absinthe-besotted factory worker killed his wife and children nearly a century ago.

The new law will allow Mr. Bugnon and dozens of other underground absinthe makers to "come out," as one Swiss newspaper put it, seek amnesty and produce absinthe legally.

"Absinthe is good for your health and I drink it almost every day," said Mr. Bugnon, filling glasses with his still illegal beverage. "My kids are growing up with its smell. Of course, I still have to be a bit careful. Until the end of the year I could be denounced by an enemy and turned in."

For Swiss distillers like Mr. Bugnon, the goal is to produce top quality, high-octane, government-approved absinthe produced from Artemisia absinthium, or wormwood, a plant native to the Val-de-Travers, the region in western Switzerland where the drink was invented.

If all goes well the distillers hope to obtain an official governmental "appellation" declaring that the region produces the only real absinthe in the world. Legalization will help the Swiss cash in on the rising global market for absinthe, which can be bought easily, and often illegally, over the Internet. There are Internet sites offering absinthe recipes and sources for wormwood seed.

In addition to prodigious amounts of alcohol, absinthe contains thujone, a toxic chemical found in wormwood that was used to treat stomach ailments as far back as ancient times but can cause tremors, hallucinations, paralysis and brain damage in large enough doses.

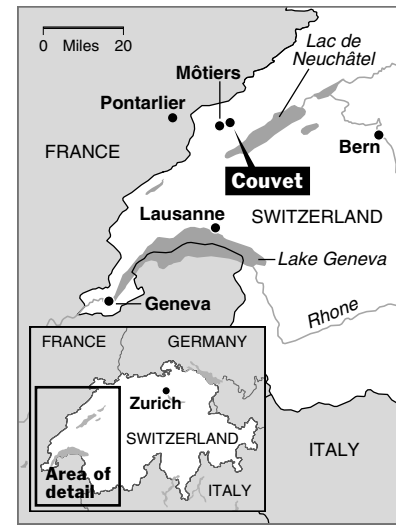
Absinthe with a low level of thujone is already sold legally in countries including Canada, Germany, New Zealand, Austria, Japan, Sweden, Italy and Britain, but not the United States. The Netherlands lifted its ban last July.



In his distillery in Môtiers, Yves Kübler, right, produces absinthe, which is being legalized in Switzerland after nearly a century. At left is his current product; he is planning to make an even more powerful version.



Yves Leresche for The New York Times



The New York Times

Claude-Alain Bugnon, in his kitchen in Couvet, adding some water from a ceramic urn to a glass of the absinthe he makes in his basement distillery. He is tinkering with his recipe to get the right mix of herbs.

Nicknamed "the Green Fairy," "the green curse of France" and "the milk of the Jura," absinthe was associated with the writers, painters, prostitutes and anarchists of the belle époque. Oscar Wilde claimed to have seen tulips growing from the tile floor of a bar where he had been drinking absinthe. Toulouse-Lautrec mixed it with cognac instead of water and called it the "Earthquake."

Its seductive powers have been featured in a flurry of films in recent years, from "Moulin Rouge," in which a song is dedicated to the drink, to "From Hell," in which Johnny Depp plays a troubled, absinthe drinking police inspector.

Mr. Bugnon is still tinkering with the right mix of herbs (among them fennel, coriander, mint and anise) for a substance that will have 53 percent alcohol content and turn creamy and slightly bluish when diluted with water. It will contain 30 to 35 milligrams per liter of thujone, less than the concoctions of a century ago.

Mr. Bugnon has received a small metal license plate from the Swiss government that has been soldered to his still. An Italian illustrator has designed an elegant green label. A German importer wants to take his product abroad.

Even though Mr. Bugnon has proven is that it does not take much to

make a great absinthe, he faces formidable competition.

Two miles away in the village of Môtiers is the headquarters of the Blackmint Distillery, owned by Yves Kübler, a former electrical technician whose great-grandfather was a regional absinthe producer.

Four years ago the absinthe ban was eased to allow Mr. Kübler to legally distill and sell, locally and abroad, an "extract of absinthe," a 90-proof liqueur with 10 milligrams of thujone per liter. With the local agriculture department, he helped persuade farmers to cultivate wormwood again so he could produce an authentic regional absinthe.

He has already begun to package \$35 boxed Christmas gift packages with half-liter bottles of absinthe, two monogrammed glasses and a perforated spoon in the shape of a wormwood leaf for those who like to filter their drink through a sugar cube.

He now plans to make a new, more powerful absinthe that he says will have "a more elegant, refined taste than the one I'm making now."

"It's like the difference between toilet water and a fine perfume," he said.

There is even stiffer competition a few miles away in the French village of Pontarlier, where production began after France relaxed its ban in

1988, allowing producers to make a drink with less than 10 milligrams of thujone per liter.

Absinthe, after all, was first produced commercially in 1797 by Henri-Louis Pernod, a Frenchman whose father-in-law bought the recipe from its inventor, Pierre Ordinaire, a French doctor living in Couvet.

Complicating the market outlook, Spain, Portugal and the Czech Republic have never banned absinthe production, although their absinthes are much rougher than Swiss and French brands.

Not everyone in the Val-de-Travers is sanguine about legalization in Switzerland. For Pierre André Delachaux, a high school teacher and author of several books on absinthe, the move will destroy the mystique that came with the ban.

"I want to preserve the myth that comes with keeping absinthe forbidden and clandestine," said Mr. Delachaux, who is also the curator of a small museum in Môtiers with a special absinthe section.

"The myth is the thrill of breaking the law and not getting caught," he said. "The myth is offering as much money as you can and maybe still not finding what you're looking for. Next year you'll find absinthe in all the supermarkets. We're going to have the absinthe of the bazaar."

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