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Absinthe Is Back

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By Carolyn Sayre

Want to party like it's 1899? Well, now you can--sort of. After nearly a century-long ban on absinthe in the U.S., a federal agency has begrudgingly allowed two European distillers to sell the mysterious liquor Stateside. Renowned for its supposedly hallucinogenic effects, the anise-flavored alcohol was rumored to have caused an epidemic of psychosis in France in the late 1800s--most infamously, leading Vincent van Gogh to cut off his ear. But before you kick one back Parisian-style, consider this: absinthe may not be the transcendent experience marketers want you to think it is.

Often referred to as the Green Fairy, absinthe gets its chartreuse hue from wormwood, an herb that contains the chemical thujone, which is reputed to cause hallucinations. But despite years of research discrediting the transcendental effects, new bottles can be sold in the U.S. only if they are classified as thujone-free. "When something has been banned for a century, it is natural to think there is something wrong with it," Robert Lehrman, an attorney for the Swiss distiller Kübler & Wyss, says of the antithujone regulation. After much lobbying, his client's brand began selling in New York City and Boston in October. Price per bottle: \$50 to \$60.

But the biggest controversy surrounding the liquor--once dubbed "one of the worst enemies of man"--is about not its resurgence but rather its authenticity. Enthusiasts claim the thujone-free brands, which contain less than 10 parts per million (p.p.m.) of the chemical, are made with the same relatively small amounts of thujone as the old brews. But scientists wrote in the *British Medical Journal* that absinthe bottled before 1900 packed up to 260 p.p.m. of thujone--which may not sound like much, but consider that only 15 parts per billion of lead in drinking water is enough to scare regulators. "They are playing pretend," study co-author Wilfred Arnold says of the liquor's new cheerleaders. "It is nothing like the old stuff."

So the question that remains is, How mind-altering were Van Gogh's cocktails? Skeptics pooh-pooh the so-called absinthe effect as hype perpetuated by artists and people trying to sell newspapers. Yet research shows that thujone has a significant effect on the brain, in part by blocking the neurotransmitter that controls nerve impulses. "It makes the brain zap around really fast," says Jad Adams, who wrote in *Hideous Absinthe* about the liquor's renown for causing lucid inebriations. "Like when you have a really strong cup of coffee."

Regardless of exactly how potent absinthe is or isn't, Lehrman says one thing is certain: "If you drink three bottles, you are going to do something stupid."