

# ABSINTHE



Common wisdom holds, the more you tell people they can't have something, the more they will want it.

And so it seemingly is with the resurgence of a beverage reputed to have served up madness and, in some cases, death for its drinkers.

It was never far from writer Ernest Hemingway's side at his residence in Key West or during his travels in Spain.

A liqueur, distilled from a concoction of licorice-smelling herbs, said to have been equal parts inspiration for Vincent Van Gogh's beautiful still-lives and landscapes, as well as the impulse to slice off part of his ear.

We're talking, of course, about the Green Fairy. *La Fee Verte*.

Absinthe.

Shock-rocker Marilyn Manson has frequently mentioned his absinthe use in recent interviews, citing the drink as a source of inspiration for his twisted tunes.

The opalescent, greenish-yellow beverage — banned in many European countries and the United States in the early part of the last century because it was thought to cause hallucinations, insanity and death — recently has shimmered in glasses on Hollywood sets like those for the Jack the Ripper flick "From Hell" and "Moulin Rouge."

Internet sites dedicated to absinthe have cropped up at the same time actual absinthe brands have started to be offered for sale abroad — much of Europe having lifted the ban on the beverage.

Some products, like La Fee Absinthe from Paris, are being offered for sale over the Internet, even to the U.S. — though technically, they aren't supposed to be.

Sites also offer absinthe glasses and reproductions of the trowel-shaped, slotted, absinthe spoons, traditionally placed across a glass so water could be poured over a sugarcube to dissolve it into the drink.

It would be easy to dismiss all this attention to a long-forbidden drink as yet another ploy by dedicated capitalists to turn a buck.

But absinthe's history and impact on the arts over the years cannot be dismissed.

**By Brian Neill**

After all, so much of the art we gaze at in museums and what we read in the greatest novels and poetry is documented to have been influenced in some way by this distilled, herbal drink.

In addition to Van Gogh and Toulouse-Lautrec, artists Paul Gauguin, Edgar Degas and Pablo Picasso were all absinthe imbibers.

Not only did absinthe provide inspiration for these artists, but it was frequently the object of their art as well.

Most of those depictions, such as Degas' "L'Absinthe," featured absinthe drinkers who appeared pensive, in reverie or depressingly detached.

The green drink was also the inspiration for Picasso's bronze sculpture, "The Absinthe Glass," a surrealistic, melting mass topped by an absinthe spoon and metallic sugarcube.

Hemingway, in "For Whom the Bell Tolls," talks of absinthe's ability to transcend all the cares and pleasures of the world.

Oscar Wilde, the famed novelist, poet and playwright, summed up absinthe in this way:

"After the first glass you see things as you wish they were. After the second, you see things as they are not. Finally you see things as they really are, and that is the most horrible thing in the world."

Much of absinthe's history can be found in a book by Barnaby Conrad, III, titled, "Absinthe: History in a Bottle," widely considered the bible for absinthe historians.

It also can be learned by talking with T.A. Breaux, a 36-year-old environmental biologist and chemist from New Orleans who's had a decade-long love affair with absinthe.

Breaux first became intrigued by absinthe while in college.

"Someone once mentioned to me, 'the green liquor that made you crazy,'" Breaux recalled during a phone interview. "And I said, 'Which one is that?'"

That same week, Breaux, who had an interest in liquor chemistry, coincidentally ran across Conrad's book. He read it cover-to-cover three times, and managed to contact the author to talk to him about the topic.

"I was just kind of fascinated; there really wasn't much information on the subject and much of it was contradictory," Breaux said, "which meant that, basically, much of it was just flat out wrong. So, not

being a person that likes being stumped by a mystery I just got into it."

Breaux has sampled various modern-day absinthes during trips abroad and also has tried traditional, 19th-century recipes such as Pernod-Fils (Pronounced Per-no Fee) he acquired at various estate sales.

Oh, and Breaux has even made his own absinthe and plans to market it in the future.

That's right, being a chemist enabled Breaux to reproduce batches of genuine

of herbs to be stuffed into bottles of grain alcohol to extract the oils from the various plants.

"The thing is, you cannot make absinthe at home," Breaux said disdainfully. "Shoving herbs into a bottle of alcohol or vodka or whatever does not yield absinthe. It yields a very nasty substance which some unwitting people will assume is absinthe, and it couldn't be further from the truth."

Breaux said making absinthe requires the same skill as making a fine scotch

having a pleasant, herbal flavor.

"It has a unique taste," Breaux said. "It tastes like anise and herbs and it became very popular, not because it caused hallucinations or gave drug-like effects, but because, for its traditional strength, it is a very drinkable drink."

In many ways, absinthe, which actually originated in Switzerland before it caught on in elegant-era Paris, has received unfair indictment over the years, Breaux and Conrad maintain.

Absinthe's alleged hallucinatory and psychoactive qualities are attributed to one of its ingredients, *artemisia absinthium*, derived from the wormwood plant.

The plant's oil contains the chemical thujone, which has a similar molecular makeup as tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the active ingredient in marijuana.

Wormwood, in high enough doses, is also classified by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) as a poisonous plant that can lead to nerve and brain damage, even death.

In researching his book, Conrad examined stacks of medical papers and publications on wormwood and thujone before reaching the following conclusion:

"We now know that alcohol itself is an addictive substance. But was absinthe more addictive than other alcoholic beverages? Probably not," Conrad wrote, adding that "a full bottle of absinthe should be condemned more for its high alcohol content than its thujone content."

Interestingly, Conrad's book opens with the account of Jean Lanfray, a 31-year-old Swiss laborer who shot and killed his wife and kids in 1905 after his wife refused to polish his shoes.

The incident sparked a mass petition drive to ban absinthe in Lanfray's village after it was discovered he had drunk two absinthes that morning.

What got little coverage in the European newspapers, however, was that the day of the murder, Lanfray also drank a creme de menthe, a cognac and soda, seven glasses of wine and a cup of coffee laced with brandy before arriving home to commit the heinous act. At the moment he snapped, Conrad wrote, Lanfray was in the process of downing another brandy-laced coffee.

Although the prosecutor, himself,



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— An FDA spokesman

absinthe by extracting and analyzing samples from various vintage bottles.

He was set to start production in Thailand on his own line of absinthe, under the name Jade Liqueurs, although he said things temporarily have been put on hold.

He did not elaborate.

As an absinthe connoisseur, Breaux takes the emerald drink seriously and is easily annoyed by myriad imposter brands being sold on the market today that are heavy on the sugar and rely on artificial coloring rather than plant chlorophyll to achieve their green hue.

Breaux also has seen absinthe-making kits offered online, which include packets

or brandy.

And Breaux said people hoping to see the walls melt and cartoon characters prance around the living room after a few absinthes should look elsewhere. It isn't gonna happen.

However, Breaux said, absinthe's effects do differ from other potent potables.

He said traditional absinthe, which hovers around 140 proof, is full of herbs that work in both stimulative and sedative ways.

"And so it just kind of gives you a nice, pleasant, lucid sort of sensation," Breaux said. "It's not at all like drugs, but if you drink a couple of absinthes it's not like drinking a couple of 151-proof rums."

Breaux went on to describe absinthe as

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focused attention on Lanfray's alcoholism in general, rather than his absinthe drinking, newspapers persisted in carrying the story of "the absinthe murder," Conrad wrote.

Soon after, in 1908, and with the help of the Swiss religious temperance league, absinthe was banned in Switzerland.

Absinthe was banned in the United States in 1912 after the drink had caught on here, particularly in New Orleans, where a landmark with its namesake, the Absinthe House, still stands as a popular tourist spot.

Between 1874 and 1910, Conrad wrote, absinthe consumption in France had grown from an annual 700,000 liters to a whopping 36 million liters a year, in part because a pest blight had wiped out wine-making crops in the late 1800s.

France banned absinthe in 1915.

That wormwood, in high doses, is poisonous is undisputed.

But Breaux and Conrad suggest that, more than the presence of wormwood and a high alcohol content, there were other forces at work that may have contributed to people losing their minds, and lives, ostensibly at the hands of absinthe.

Though Van Gogh was a famous absinthe drinker, Conrad points out in his book that the artist also drank the turpentine used to clean his brushes and may have had a congenital brain defect. Conrad also notes that many of the absinthe drinkers at the time were multi-substance users, which may have had a cumulative effect on the deterioration of their health.

There were also few, if any, controls on beverages and foods.

Absinthe was known for its greenish hue and its tendency to *louche*, or take on a milky, opaque appearance when water was added.

While reputable, established producers of 19th-century absinthe achieved those traits in their products through the natural distillation of herbs, other less scrupulous makers, out to make quick and easy money, took shortcuts, using toxic substances such as copper sulfate and antimony chloride to make their absinthe look proper in the glass.

"And what you had is these poor alcoholics drinking 20 drinks a day of these toxic compounds," Breaux said. "And what's going to happen?"

Despite the dangers associated with absinthe — real or perceived — the beverage is enjoying a renewed popularity judging from recent exchanges on Internet chat rooms and the number of absinthe-related art and items — even actual bottles of absinthe ("for serious bottle collectors only," the disclaimers read) — for sale on eBay.

Although many absinthe brands being marketed are bogus, some, Breaux and others say, are real, though not exactly the same quality as 100 years ago.

But are these absinthe drinkers breaking the law?

The answer seems somewhat gray.

The bulk of "legitimate" absinthe comes from abroad, aficionados note.

U.S. Customs officials stated by phone and on the agency's Web site, that importing absinthe and other liqueurs that contain "an excess of Artemisia Absinthium" (wormwood) is prohibited, and referred questions regarding "what percentage is allowable" to the FDA.

After some run-around, an FDA spokesman was finally reached to talk about absinthe, as long as his name wasn't used — an agency policy.

The spokesman said that Food Inspection Decision No. 147 banned absinthe as a "poisonous or deleterious" substance in 1912 because it contained wormwood.

However, wormwood, though poisonous in high amounts, does have a legal and legitimate use as a food additive, the spokesman said.

According to the FDA guidelines, the only permissible wormwood is that which is thujone-free, as determined by lab analysis, the spokesman said.

Breaux said he was quite familiar with the process to determine the presence of thujone, having performed it a number of times himself.

He downplayed the FDA's absinthe-policing role, comparing the beverage to Cuban cigars.

"You can read people writing articles in cigar magazines, talking about smoking a Havana Montecristo, and no one's knocking on their door," Breaux said. "It's just not that big of a deal."

But the FDA spokesman said no one should think the agency is going to overlook absinthe.

"We aren't going to be looking at absinthe, sort of, in the blind. It would be in the context of thujone content, because we do have this food additive regulation that authorizes extracts of wormwood to be used in food," the spokesman said. "So this would be the issue for us, is whether the (substance) is thujone-free. And that's what we would be looking at."

The spokesman said the FDA can pursue seizure of the substance, injunctions prohibiting its sale and even prosecution, if it so deems.

"All of those have been used as an enforcement tool," the spokesman said. "I'm not suggesting that we would use any particular one of them, or the other, but any of them are options."

But the thujone-free guideline, some absinthe enthusiasts say, seems contradictory.

Currently, they point out, there are beverages available at any local bar that contain thujone.

Vermouth, the herb-infused wine used to flavor martinis and Manhattans, contains trace amounts of thujone.

In fact, vermouth derives its name from the German *wermud*, which translates to wormwood, one of its key ingredients.

The college frat fave, Jagermeister, as well as the Benedictine liqueur that goes into making a Singapore sling, are also said to contain thujone.

And the producers of a product billing itself as an absinthe substitute, called Absente, also claim their product contains thujone, though far less than the 10 milligrams per liter allowed in Europe.

Absente is available at Summerville Ace liquor store in Augusta.

All of that said, I managed to get my hands on a bottle of *Un Emile 68*, an absinthe produced in Pontarlier, France, and one which Breaux cites as one of the most traditional available today.

The "68" refers to the alcohol percentage, making it about 136 proof.

The makers of *Un Emile* purport to use wormwood distillate in a 19th-century recipe derived from the Pernod family, one of the leading makers of absinthe in the day.

An intense aroma of licorice, owing to the anise, rose from the bottle. It was a pleasant smell, albeit a tad medicinal.

In preparation for the ritual, I poured about three-fourths of a shot into a glass. The absinthe was a clear, golden color, much like a scotch would be, and not the artificially colored green of many bogus brands Breaux says are on the market today.

As I swirled the absinthe around in the glass, droplets of the dense alcohol that became stranded on the sides slowly ambled back down to rejoin their source.

I placed a reproduction absinthe spoon across the mouth of the glass and topped it with a sugarcube.

Slowly, I trickled cold water over the sugarcube and into the glass.

At first I was puzzled, because the contents of the glass did not louche.

Then, after a few more slow trickles of water, the liquid in the glass took on that cloudy, opaline appearance I was expecting.

An observer said the contents of the glass looked like lemonade.

My anticipation grew as the Green Hour (*l'heure verte*), as it was called in French cafes during absinthe's day, arrived.

I took a casual first sip and was greeted with a dense, licorice flavor that had a numbing effect on my tongue. Alcohol was definitely present, but despite the drink's high proof, there wasn't that fire-in-the-throat feeling.

It was fairly refreshing for its strength.

By the third or fourth sip, I started to feel very warm inside.

After finishing my first, I fixed another. Then another, this time taking a small sip of it neat.

The warmth and thick anise taste were amazing, and even sipped straight, the absinthe did not bring on the burn one

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**— T.A. Breaux, absinthe connoisseur**



would expect from an alcohol of similar strength.

However, "only a lunatic," would drink absinthe straight, a former University of Edinburgh professor is quoted saying in Conrad's book. I went ahead and added the water, this time without sugar, to the third drink.

By now I was quite comfortable.

I didn't hallucinate, nor did I feel compelled to attempt a post-impressionist rendition of my surroundings.

But I have to admit, there was something a little different. I felt like I was experiencing a slightly enhanced sense of awareness, becoming more attuned to things like the whirring drone of an air-conditioner and the shadows cast by a turning ceiling fan.

Of course, that could have been my imagination. Or, again, the strong alcohol.

Nonetheless, I quickly realized something: Though I'm no big licorice fan, this was something I could really get to like. It truly was pleasant.

After finishing the three drinks, including a few more small measures — you know, just to shore up the water a bit — I felt more relaxed than drunk. And the next morning, I awoke feeling nothing in the way of ill effects or hangover.

So why all the fuss and controversy?

Breaux chalks it up to hype, such as the scene in "From Hell" in which Depp lights a sugarcube on fire for his absinthe.

"It's ridiculous. First of all, no one in the old days did the modern-day, Czech (sugar) flaming ritual," Breaux said. "It's strictly for effect and, historically speaking, is absolutely ludicrous.

"These people are not historians, they're just trying to create a sensation. They're

actors or musicians. They thrive on that."

Breaux thinks Europe could have lifted the ban on absinthe much sooner than only a few years ago if people had looked harder at the facts.

And he thinks absinthe should be accepted as a diversionary spirit, subjected to the same regulations and controls as many other foods and beverages.

"I mean, they have very specific rules in France for making anything from certain regional cheeses, to certain regional wines, to liquors," Breaux said. "They could have easily done the same thing with absinthe but they didn't do it, and, because of that, we've had a century of rumors and myths.

"And one day I hope people will come to understand absinthe as a liquor of art, and not some type of drug that it certainly is not."



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