The History of Absinthe

Absinthe is a spirit of curiosity, of legend, of tradition and timeless endurance. But how did it come to earn such a reputation? Created as an elixir in 1797 by Dr. Pierre Ordinaire, it was lauded as a 'miracle cure-all.' Henri-Louis Pernod opened the first absinthe distillery in Switzerland and then moved to a larger one in Pontarlier, France in 1805.

Absinthe gained its popularity among French soldiers stationed in North Africa in the 1840s, who used it as a disease preventative and water purifier. They brought their taste for the herbal beverage back to the cafés of Paris, where it became a fashionable drink of the bourgeoisie. It became so popular that the time between 5:00 p.m. and 7:00 p.m. became known as "l'heure verte" (the Green Hour), and absinthe soon became the most popular aperitif in France. Urbanites embraced its entrancing mix of grande wormwood, green anise, fennel and other European herbs that created an almost ethereal warmth.

Absinthe was embraced by the bohemians of Paris, due to its alleged "rapturous" qualities that were claimed to induce creativity. It was featured frequently in the paintings of such artists as Lautrec, Manet, Van Gogh and Picasso. When they were not painting it, they were drinking it in large quantities, joined by contemporary poets such as Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Verlaine.

Absinthe production grew so much that it eventually became cheaper than wine. This was compounded by the fact that during the late 1800s, phylloxera ravaged the vineyards of Europe, making wine both expensive and scare.

By the turn of the century, prohibition and temperance movements were well underway. The advocates of the wine industry joined in the effort, taking advantage of the opportunity to demonize their green rival. Absinthe was singled out as the maddening culprit of society's ills and became synonymous with alcohol. On July 25th, 1912, following an earlier Swiss ban in 1910, the U.S. Department of Agriculture issued Food Inspection 147, which effectively banned absinthe in America, and France finally abolished its 'national drink' at the onset of the First World War in 1915.

About absinthe there is an aura of decadence, madness and perversity. The once-banned liquor recalls the imagery and elegance of poetry by Baudelaire or Verlaine, the withering hauteur of Oscar Wilde, the tastes of Toulouse-Lautrec and the passions of van Gogh. Each of these figures paid fervent tribute to absinthe: the green fairy, the green goddess, the green muse, the glaucous witch, the queen of poisons.

In the late 19th century, absinthe was so popular that in Paris it rivaled wine as the drink of choice. Nineteenth-century writers like Alfred de Musset fell prey to intoxication. At the Académie Française, where he was working on a dictionary, it was said that he "absinthes himself too often."

Toulouse-Lautrec was so wedded to absinthe that he had a special cane made that hid a glass. He may have also introduced the drink to van Gogh, who threw himself into it with abandon. Aside from drinking the liquor, van Gogh painted it, and once threw a glass of it at Gauguin. Manet and Degas painted absinthe drinkers. So did Picasso. Munch drank it heavily and Strindberg fed his insanity with it. Verlaine felt enslaved to what he called "the green and terrible drink."

Over the last decade, absinthe has reemerged on the European scene following its re-legalization in the EU and Switzerland. The legalization of absinthe in Europe, as well as its recent appearance in popular culture, has led to a resurgence of interest in the United States. Curious consumers and US travelers returning from Europe with tales of sipping absinthe fueled the desire for availability in the American market.

Absinthe was never just another drink. It has a special place in the history of modern culture.

Did I mention that Absinthe was also considered a 19th-century version of viagra?
**SOME ABISNTHE QUESTIONS**

**What is absinthe?**
Absinthe is a distilled, highly alcoholic anise-flavored spirit derived from herbs and the fundamental ingredient: grand wormwood (Artemisia absinthium).
It was popular in the late 19th and early 20th century, especially in France, particularly among Parisian artists and writers such as Van Gogh and Lautrec and at the height of its popularity was banned.
It is typically green in colour, turning to a cloudy, opalescent milky green (known as the louche) when mixed with water and is historically referred to as ‘The Green Fairy’.

**Wormwood - an interesting history**
Wormwood regularly hits the press, and if you scan the web for entries on wormwood you will find many, from health sites promoting its positive properties, to ancient texts highlighting its poison.

**What is wormwood?**
Wormwood, named after the Greek goddess, Artemis; the goddess of hunting and childbirth, belongs to the family of Compositae, a group consisting of 180 species. Many artemisia varieties have insecticidal properties, wormwood being the most potent. It is a shrub-like perennial, native to Europe and Asia, with flowers that have a greenish-yellow tint. The whole family share an extreme bitterness from all parts of the plant: ‘As bitter as wormwood’ is a very ancient proverb. Today in some of the Western states of North America you will find large plains covered in certain kinds of artemisia, which are of no use as forage. The few animals that do decide to munch on them, are said to have a bitter taste when eaten.

**Is absinthe illegal?**
No.

**Why was absinthe banned?**
Spurred by the temperance movement absinthe became the scapegoat for all alcohol – pressure also came via the wine makers’ association, who saw absinthe as a direct threat to their sales, which had been badly hit by the spread of the phylloxera bug that destroyed the majority of French vineyards by the late 1800’s. The final nail in the coffin came from Switzerland, where a Monsieur Lanfray shot his entire family after drinking absinthe. Overlooking the fact that he had also consumed seven glasses of wine, six glasses of cognac, one coffee laced with brandy and two crème de menthes, absinthe was left to blame and in 1907 Switzerland passed their ban.

**What is an absinthe spoon?**
It is a special slotted spoon designed so that a sugar lump can be placed on it and water dripped over. The spoon allows for the correct separation of the three ingredients, absinthe, water and sugar. The water dripping slowly dissolves the sugar at the correct speed, if sugar is placed straight into absinthe then it reduces the ability to dissolve efficiently, especially 100 years ago when sugar was less refined.

**Is absinthe an aphrodisiac?**
Absinthe was certainly believed to be a strong aphrodisiac in its heyday; two of absinthe’s ingredients (Wormwood and Anise) were reputed to have such an effect. The English poet Ernest Dowson coined the phrase ‘Absinthe makes the tart grow fonder’.

We’ll let you decide if this is true!
GRANDE ABSENTÉ
This is a French absinthe distilled in Forcalquier, a small city in Provence, one of the historic areas of absinthe production.
Nicely balanced and reasonably complex. A nicely balanced aroma of wormwood, mint, anise, lemon balm, among other things. This has a high proof and the alcohol presence makes itself known in the bouquet - but not in the overwhelming way which one would expect. While the alcohol does express its presence it is not overwhelming but does warn you this is serious stuff. Clear, bright green tint/cast to it. Nice, appropriate color without resorting to the cheap poisonous dyes that are used in some of the cheaper overseas absinthe that is still banned in the U.S.

Produced In Forcalquier at Distilleries-Domaines de Provence, France
Alcohol by Volume: 69%

LA FÉE
La Fée Absinthe Parisienne was the first traditional absinthe distilled in France after the 1915 ban was lifted, and the only absinthe authenticated by the Musée de l'Absinthe in Auvers-sur-Oise, France.
Multilayered: anise, licorice, fennel, wormwood, spicy notes, mint, vanilla, lemon balm. A somewhat spirity alcohol in background. Quite the mix of scents altogether. A rollercoaster ride for your nose!

Produced In Auvers-Sur-Oise, Paris, France
Alcohol by Volume: 68%
Gold Medal - LA International Wine & Spirits Competition 2009
Gold Medal - San Francisco World Spirits Competition, 2008
Gold Medal - Beverage Testing Institute, 2007

PERNOD
According to the popular history Docteur Ordinaire, a French doctor in exile in Switzerland came up with the bitter tonic absinthe in 1795.
Banned in 1915, and back on the international market today, Pernod is pretty much dominant name in absinthe in the same way that Jim Beam brands of bourbon or Johnny Walker Scotch brands are to their respective categories - the name everyone knows.
Star anise and mint - and a host of other herbs (gentian, vervaine, yarrow). Alcohol in background rather than foreground. Sweetish pastis/licorice, star anise smell overall very much in the style of its frère Pernod Pastis

Produced In of France
Alcohol by Volume: 68%

MANSINTHE
Produced by Marilyn Manson,
The nose is very nice; light and crisp. Overtones of wormwood and hyssop rounded out by anise. Just a hint of what I would call freshly cut celery, quite refreshing. Nice wormwood bitterness pairs well with the anise sweetness.
Overall, quite a surprise, given its sponsor. However, its distiller has kept with his tradition of top notch distillation.

Produced In Switzerland
Alcohol by Volume: 66%
Gold Medal - San Francisco World Spirits Competition
MEPHISTO

Mysterious and elegant. The absinthe flavor is there, but subtle, as is the Scotch whisky. These flavors hide in the shadows, just out of reach, but their looming mystery ties the cocktail together with whispers of fairy. Mephisto is still prepared by hand in Austria, and uses an original century old secret recipe. Because of this meticulous and traditional process, Mephisto Absinthe is truly an experience to behold.

Produced In Vienna, Austria
Alcohol by Volume: 65%

LUCID

Grande Wormwood-based, Lucid is crafted directly from selected whole herbs, including Grande Wormwood, and never from cheaper assemblages, macerations, extracts of oils. The color isn’t as bright as the Jades, but very natural and pleasant. There’s just a hint of murkiness. The louche starts with wonderful oil trails and builds slowly from the bottom to the top, with a clear delineation of green and milky white. The aroma is spicy and herbal with nice amounts of anise and fennel. Quite powerful.

Produced In France
Alcohol by Volume: 62%

VIEUX CARRE

Vieux Carre It’s well balanced, light and still the color its a deep emerald/forest green. The aroma, lots of very nice anise and fennel with some minty wormwood in the background. Well balanced and refreshing. The flavor, a nice light sweetness that plays well with the light anise and floral wormwood. The genepi adds a nice ‘roundness’ to the overall flavor and texture. The flavors linger on the tongue for quite a while. As Vieux Carre is made with real herbs, some sedimentation is normal; this is a sign of a well-made absinthe.

Produced In Pennsylvania, US
Alcohol by Volume: 60%

ST. GEORGE

St. George Spirits Absinthe Verte is made with fine brandy, star anise, mint, wormwood, lemon balm, hyssop, meadowsweet, basil, fennel, tarragon and stinging nettles. The aroma is extremely crisp and clean. Lots of floral notes. The flavor is extremely spicy. There’s a nice wormwood bitterness that’s enhanced by the nettles and tarragon. It will garner a lot of attention from those with sophisticated palates.

Produced In California, US
Alcohol by Volume: 60%
**KUBLER**

The color is very bright and clear, as would be expected from a blanche. Louche begins quickly and builds well, with nice oil trails, and a clearly defined layering effect. The aroma is herbal, light and refreshing. Flavor starts out well, with a nice anise sweetness which finishes with an alpine wormwood bitterness. Simple, yet extremely enjoyable.

*Produced In Newchatel, Switzerland*
*Alcohol by Volume: 53%*

**VERSINTHE**

A nicely balanced aroma of wormwood, gentian, verbena, coriander and anise. There are 20 different botanicals used in this blend and you can pick up on most of them. Clear, bright, yellow/green cast to it which is an indicator of the use of dried wormwood - and no attempts to color or dope it with dyes. Taste is Rather complex and multifaceted- especially with a pleasant bitter finish with a sugar rimming to it. Well made and relatively complex.

*Produced In Aix-en-Provence, France*
*Alcohol by Volume: 45%*

"A glass of absinthe is as poetical as anything in the world, what difference is there between a glas of absinthe and sunset "

~ Oscar Wilde

"Got tingt last night on absinthe. Did knife tricks "

~ Ernest Hemingway