

# Seeing GREEN

Absinthe is back—better than ever

Story by PAUL CLARKE

Photographs by STUART MULLENBERG

**It's** a hot, muggy night in New Orleans, and in a restaurant near the French Quarter, a group of nearly 20 absinthe enthusiasts have gathered in a back room. Lou Rawls gently croons from the sound system as waiters bring in plates of hors d'oeuvres and a wine steward uncorks a black bottle of French absinthe. At the front of the room is a well-iced absinthe fountain, its glass bowl dewy with condensation. As the evening progresses, the room fills with a gentle herbaceous funk, as glass after glass of pale-emerald absinthe blooms with inverted opalescent flowers with the drip of each icy droplet of water, eventually becoming milky white in the spirit's characteristic *louche*. >>



Absinthe glasses, spoon and fountain from La Maison D'Absinthe (laisonabsinthe.com). Table runner from Relish (shoprelish.com)

# Absinthe Drip

The absinthe drip is the traditional way of preparing absinthe. By slowly adding water, the absinthe releases its distinctive aroma and blooms into its characteristic louche, or opalescent appearance. Despite the pyrotechnics seen in boisterous European bars and in tragicomic clips on YouTube, fire has no part in the preparation of authentic absinthe.

1 oz. absinthe  
Ice water  
Sugar cube (optional)

Tools: absinthe spoon; small carafe or pitcher of ice water. An absinthe fountain adds a beautiful touch, and works even better than a carafe.

A special device called a brouilleur—basically a shallow bowl that sits atop the glass, perforated with a small hole through which the ice water drips—may also be used.

Glass: an absinthe glass is preferred; a wine glass or water goblet will also work.

Pour the absinthe into the glass. If using sugar, place an absinthe spoon across the mouth of the glass and the sugar cube atop it. Slowly drip or trickle water through the sugar cube, allowing the absinthe to gradually louche as the sugar dissolves (if using a brouilleur, fill the saucer with ice and insert into the glass; add water as desired). Three parts water to one part absinthe is traditional, but adjust to your own taste. Use the spoon to stir in the remaining sugar.



# What Is ABSINTHE?

**It would seem to be an easy question.** But with the rise of spirits sold as absinthe in Europe, Canada and on the Internet—which are typically consumed in gimmicky fire rituals and are marketed with boasts about high thujone content and frequent references to Vincent van Gogh’s missing ear—the answer isn’t clear to the casual observer.

“Absinthe is an artisanal product, crafted from whole herbs and base spirits, and it requires distillation,” says Ted Breaux. “What absinthe isn’t is industrial alcohol adulterated with a few drops of aromatherapy oil and some blue-green dye.”

Many botanicals may be found in traditional absinthes, but several are common: anise, which gives absinthe its distinctive flavor and aroma; fennel, which works much like anise, and contributes a gentle sweetness; lemon balm (also called melissa) and hyssop, which lend color and herbal complexity; and, notably, grande wormwood—*Artemisia absinthium*—which gives absinthe a subtle, telltale bitterness.

While several styles of absinthe exist, all share a distinctive anise flavor—a fact that may challenge the spirit’s widespread acceptance in the U.S.. “Absinthe was, is and always will be an anise-flavored drink,” Breaux says, noting the popularity of anise as a flavor in France and other parts of Europe. Anise may be the defining flavor of absinthe, but the taste is actually much more complicated. Together, the various ingredients create an aroma and a flavor that are ethereal and entrancing, with a slight herbal sweetness leavened by a cascade of crisp, bright vegetal notes, and with a gentle, underlying bitterness.

## Effects

**Claims about absinthe’s psychotropic effects** have been greatly exaggerated, as proved by recent studies regarding thujone and a careful look at the historical record. Unfortunately, this information is slow to get around.

Of course, it shouldn’t be assumed that absinthe is completely benign. Most absinthes are bottled at more than 60 percent alcohol, and absinthe drinkers often feel a sense of refreshing lucidity—probably created by the mix of herbs in the spirit. But rather than the mind-bending hallucinations promised by marketers of dubious faux-absinthes, the experience is more akin to that from drinking a cup of mildly caffeinated tea.

For much of the past century, drinking absinthe in public carried the same stigma, if not quite the same risk, as engaging in activities of a more tawdry or illicit nature. But at this dinner in New Orleans, attendees had more to toast than one another’s health: Last May, absinthe became legally available in the United States for the first time in 95 years, and the diners were celebrating the end of a long drought—even if their joy was tempered by the fact that, technically speaking, nothing had actually changed.

“It’s common for people to say, ‘Wow, absinthe has been legalized!’ ” says Gwydion Stone, the Seattle-based founder of the Wormwood Society, an informal group that describes itself as an absinthe anti-defamation organization (members also gather for social events such as the dinner in New Orleans). “But absinthe hasn’t been legalized; it’s just that it’s now legally available.”

Stone doesn’t mean to communicate in doublespeak (for clarification of absinthe’s legal status, see the sidebar on page 38), but as with seemingly everything related to this mysterious spirit, even absinthe’s resurrection is the subject of great confusion. In the near-century since absinthe was banished from the U.S. and much of Europe, the spirit took on mythic status—and as with any myth, much of what is widely believed ranges from semi-accurate to completely false.

## The Fairy’s Return

When Stone established the Wormwood Society in 2004, misinformation about absinthe was widespread. Stone says that, in contrast to many claims found online, traditional absinthes are made by soaking herbs (including *Artemisia absinthium*—grande wormwood) in high-proof alcohol, then distilling the macerate. Stone says that some spirits sold as absinthe (sometimes with the deceptive “absinth” spelling, and frequently with implied promises of intense psychotropic experiences) skip this essential second step of the process; the same is true for do-it-yourself absinthe kits sold online. While the result may be alcoholically potent and unforgettably bitter, one thing it’s not is genuine absinthe. “The herbs have to be distilled in it; it’s not something you can just macerate,” he says. “There are some old traditional bitters made from botanicals—including wormwood—steeped in alcohol, but none of those are absinthe.”

Eventually, Stone’s interest prompted him to create a formula for a vintage-style absinthe, Marteau Verte Classique, which began commercial production in October at the Matter-Luginbühl Distillery in Switzerland. Marteau is currently sold in Europe and online, and Stone hopes to introduce the spirit into the U.S. this spring. He is also exploring a partnership with a domestic distillery so that he may produce his absinthe closer to home, giving him a more hands-on role in the process.

Should Marteau enter the U.S. market, it will join a rapidly growing category of legal absinthes. Lucid Absinthe Supérieure, the first absinthe to become available in the U.S., is made in France by Ted Breaux, a New Orleans-born chemist and absinthe historian who has created several of the most highly praised absinthes on the European market. In October, liquor stores began carrying a second legally approved absinthe, Kübler Absinthe Superieure, made in the Val-de-Travers region of Switzerland, the traditional birthplace of absinthe. Francois Guy, a brand of absinthe made in Pontarlier, the historic center of French absinthe production, is also expected to enter the U.S. market this summer.

Several North American absinthes are also in production. In Vernon, British Columbia, Frank Dieter says that while absinthe has long been legal in Canada, the available product was of questionable quality. “All the absinthe that was flying around Canada was basically fake,” says Dieter, owner of Okanagan Spirits, a distillery that also produces grappa and fruit eaux de vie.

# ABSINTHE and the Law

**Understanding absinthe's legal status** requires navigating a Byzantine tangle of federal regulations. In 1912, as part of a worldwide absinthe backlash and a warm-up for national Prohibition, the U.S. Department of Agriculture banned absinthe by name, as well as any food or drink made with wormwood. In 1972, this earlier law was superseded by the Food, Drug and Cosmetics Act. Instead of banning absinthe or the use of wormwood, the new law banned products containing thujone—the compound found in wormwood (and in other herbs such as sage, thyme and rosemary) that was believed responsible for absinthe's deleterious effects—in concentrations higher than 10 parts per million (or 10 milligrams per kilogram).

Until recently, it was widely assumed that absinthe contained much more thujone than the federal guidelines allowed. "It never occurred to anyone that absinthe could have less than 10 milligrams of thujone," says Gwydion Stone. So it came as quite a surprise when recent studies of pre-ban absinthes found startlingly low thujone levels—often near or below the modern-day government threshold.

"When I first got my hands on vintage absinthe, I was expecting to find 250 mg per kilogram, or something of that order," Breaux says. "But we found that the thujone is really an order of magnitude less than what was originally assumed by some researchers, and quoted as gospel. I was very, very surprised, and really, things became very clear to me. All this nonsense about thujone was created 100 years ago and used as a scapegoat to ban absinthe."

With the arrival of legal absinthe on the market, producers have demonstrated that it's possible to produce the spirit using traditional ingredients and processes, and still have a low enough thujone concentration to be granted government approval. However, the laws concerning the importation and sale of absinthe are still convoluted, and absinthe brands are approved on a case-by-case basis. Absinthes purchased while traveling or online from foreign distributors may not be approved for import, and may be seized by customs officials. To easily, safely and inexpensively try genuine absinthe, the best bet is to purchase a brand approved for domestic sale.

Using a recipe he obtained from a colleague in Switzerland, Dieter began experimenting with absinthe in 2005, using fruit-based alcohol (instead of neutral grain spirits) to give the product a more refined character. "I decided I'd make absinthe the old-fashioned way, with fruit-based spirits and top-quality herbs," he says. "The result is a very fine product."

In October, Dieter's absinthe, Taboo, became the first commercially available absinthe made in North America. Taboo debuted as a *verte*, or green absinthe, and Dieter hopes to introduce a *blanche*, or white absinthe, later this year. (Vertes are created by steeping botanicals such as petite wormwood in the distillate; these lend additional flavor while coloring the absinthe with chlorophyll. With some exceptions, vertes are typically more robust in flavor, while blanches are more delicate and subdued.) Taboo's initial run of 5,000 bottles is available through Okanagan Spirits' store in Vernon, and by online order. Dieter is currently working to obtain approval for wider distribution in Canada, and to receive approval to distribute in the United States.

By the time Taboo arrives, several absinthes made in the U.S. will likely also be on the market. St. George Spirits released its Absinthe Verte last December, and Portland, Ore.-based Integrity Spirits plans to sell its Trillium absinthe nationally later this year.

## Behind the Hype

While making absinthe comes with its own challenges, Integrity Spirits co-owner Rich Phillips says overcoming consumers' preconceived notions about absinthe—such as the spirit's rumored drug-like effects—will also take some work. "Sure, there's the mystique and the lore, but I tell people not to assume it's hallucinogenic—if it was like that, it wouldn't get federal approval," Phillips says (see the sidebar on absinthe's effects on page 37).

By making absinthe in the traditional style, Integrity is working to counter another preconceived notion: that absinthe is garishly colored and unpleasantly bitter, qualities that describe Eastern European faux-absinthes more than vintage Swiss or French spirits. "There are lots of products coming onto the market, and many of the European absinthes have artificial flavors and colors," Phillips says. "They're just undrinkable."

With absinthe's recent change of fortune, other distillers are considering entering the market. Ralph Erenzo, co-owner of Tuthilltown Spirits in Gardiner, N.Y., has made sample runs of the spirit using recipes he obtained from a museum in eastern France. Noting that the distillery is already running at capacity making whiskey and vodka, Erenzo says commercial production at Tuthilltown may not begin until much later this year. "We would like to produce it, and we know there's a demand for it," Erenzo says. "We feel we could market it well, especially since we're so close to New York City."

With their use of traditional recipes and a good track record for making quality spirits, it's possible that these distillers may help inoculate the U.S. market against the low-quality, mouthwash-colored absinthe-type beverages—derisively known as "faux-sinthe" or "assbinth"—that are typically made in Eastern Europe (or sold online as do-it-yourself kits) and marketed with lurid promises of psychotropic effects. This faux-absinthe is what consumers in much of Europe and Canada encountered beginning in the 1990s, as absinthe bans in countries such as France and Switzerland were revised, and before distillers in these traditional absinthe-producing nations could deliver authentic product to a thirsty market. Absinthe makers are determined not to let that happen in the U.S.

"I produce absinthe because I love it—I love the whole tradition; I love the integrity of the tradition; I'm enthralled by the history; and I have a great respect for the absinthe makers of the past," says Breaux, maker of Lucid and several other traditional absinthes primarily available in Europe, including Absinthe Edouard,

## Monkey Gland

Adapted from *Barflies and Cocktails* by Harry MacElhone (1927), this drink is named for a once-trendy medical procedure practiced by Dr. Serge Voronoff in the 1920s, in which a monkey's testicle was surgically transplanted into a human male. Rumored to create a sort of proto-Viagra experience, the treatment didn't work out very well—especially for the monkeys—but the drink demonstrates how absinthe brings a special vitality to a cocktail.

1 1/2 oz. gin  
1 1/2 oz. fresh-squeezed orange juice  
1 tsp. grenadine  
1 tsp. absinthe  
Ice  
Tools: shaker; strainer  
Glass: cocktail, chilled

Pour ingredients into shaker and fill with ice. Shake well for 10 seconds and strain into chilled cocktail glass.



## Chrysanthemum

"I adapted this recipe from Cocktail Bill Boothby's *World Drinks and How to Mix Them* (1934)," says bartender Jim Meehan. "I noticed that it also shows up in *The Savoy Cocktail Book* (1930), which states that the drink is 'Well-known and very popular in the American Bar of the S.S. Europa,' which was a trans-Atlantic passenger ship built in the late 1920s. I wonder how many cocktail-deprived Americans took this ship to Paris and London during Prohibition?"

2 oz. dry vermouth  
1/4 oz. Benedictine  
3 dashes absinthe  
Ice

Tools: mixing glass; bar spoon; strainer  
Glass: coupe, chilled  
Garnish: orange twist

Add ingredients to a mixing glass and fill with ice. Stir well for 30 seconds, strain into chilled glass and garnish.



Absinthe Nouvelle-Orléans and PF 1901. "It's important for me that, for people in the U.S., their first taste of absinthe is of a quality product. I hope to establish some kind of standard of quality; that way, when the profiteers and the garbage makers follow, they will be at a disadvantage."

With the arrival of Lucid and Kübler as the first absinthes on the market in the U.S., Stone feels that American consumers got very lucky. "If the faux-absinthe products had made it in first and saturated the market with brilliant colors and wrongly flavored things, that's what people would start buying and thinking of as absinthe," Stone says. Noting that many curious American drinkers have already tried these imitation products—whether at a bar in Prague, from a bottle obtained in Canada, or from a bottle or do-it-yourself absinthe kit purchased online—Stone says that for a vast majority of domestic consumers, their first taste of absinthe will be of the genuine article.

## Drinking Lessons

Consumer education is also important for those serving absinthe. "When someone sits down and asks about absinthe, it starts with a history lesson," says Jim Meehan, bartender at Pegu Club and PDT in New York. "Ninety-nine percent of the people who ask me about absinthe still think it causes hallucinations—they don't understand the product or its history, or the series of events that got absinthe where it is."

Meehan says that many customers are intrigued by absinthe's mystique and rituals, including preparation of the absinthe drip—the traditional way of serving absinthe (see instructions on page 36). While the absinthe drip allows enjoyment of the spirit in its purest form, absinthe also enjoys a long and rich history as a cocktail ingredient. "The American absinthe tradition was largely a cocktail tradition," Stone says, explaining that Marteau was developed specifically for use in mixed drinks.

Bartenders like Meehan—who have been using lower-proof, wormwood-free absinthe substitutes such as Pernod, Ricard or Herbsaint for generations—welcome absinthe's return to the bar. "One of the greatest things about working with absinthe is it has a higher proof. The more proof, the more flavor it brings to a drink," Meehan says, pointing out that vintage drinks such as the Sazerac, the Corpse Reviver No. 2 and the Monkey Gland (see recipe on page 39) were all originally made with absinthe, and that their flavor greatly benefits from using the real thing. "A dash or a rinse of absinthe like you see in classic cocktails brings a whole lot of flavor to the drink," he says. "If you compare absinthe to Pernod or Ricard, it has a similar flavor profile but it's much more complex, with a higher proof, less sugar and a little bitterness."

While many customers may try absinthe out of curiosity, Meehan hopes they'll come away from the experience with a new perspective. "The fountains, the spoons—all of those old, beautiful absinthe artifacts are a big part of enriching the ways in which people enjoy this product," Meehan says. "Each spirit—whether it's vodka, gin, rum or absinthe—is rooted in a culture. When we enjoy it properly, it creates more of an understanding and appreciation of when, how and where to enjoy distilled spirits." ■

## 6 Absinthes to Try

A handful of absinthes are either available in the U.S. or will be entering the market soon; many other quality brands are available outside the country. Here's a look at a few absinthes mentioned in this article. —P.C.

### ABSINTHE EDOUARD

[vintageabsinthe.com](http://vintageabsinthe.com) \$\$\$\$

Edouard has a light emerald color and a slow, layered louche. Aroma and flavor are both very herbaceous with a notable trace of wormwood, and while the taste is anise-forward, Edouard has an elegant, perfectly balanced complexity. An easy-to-drink absinthe that pleases both novices and connoisseurs.

### FRANCOIS GUY

[www.pontarlier-anis.com](http://www.pontarlier-anis.com) \$\$\$\$

This French verte is all about the anise. Francois Guy may be somewhat simple in its aroma and flavor, but what it lacks in complexity it makes up for in its crisp, refreshing appeal.

### KÜBLER ABSINTHE SUPÉRIÉURE

[mondoliquor.com](http://mondoliquor.com) \$\$\$\$

A Swiss blanche, Kübler has a rich, creamy louche and a light, herbal aroma. The flavor is heavy on the anise, lightly sweet and has a short, uncomplicated finish. Cheaper than many other absinthes, Kübler is a decent addition to the liquor cabinet.

### LUCID ABSINTHE SUPÉRIEURE

[www.drinklucid.com](http://www.drinklucid.com) \$\$\$\$

A French verte, Lucid has a pale olive color that louches gradually and evenly. The aroma is spicy and herbal, and the flavor has a delicate, well-balanced complexity with a softer anise character. A very good absinthe for the beginner.

### MARTEAU VERT CLASSIQUE

[www.absinthemarteau.com](http://www.absinthemarteau.com) \$\$\$\$

This verte produces a rich, full louche, with a heady aroma of green anise, fennel and coriander. Slightly spicier than other vertes, Marteau has a balanced, savory flavor and finishes with a tinge of wormwood bitterness.

### TABOO

[www.okanaganspirits.com](http://www.okanaganspirits.com) \$\$\$\$

A verte from British Columbia, Taboo has a rich anise aroma and a slow, thick louche. Made with star anise as well as green anise, the absinthe has a hearty herbal sweetness and an assertive anise flavor—which comes at the expense of a bit of complexity, though this is redeemed somewhat by a lingering wormwood finish.

### PRICING GUIDE

\$\$\$\$ - \$51 and up