Artemisia La Clandestine Absinthe

PHOTO COURTESY OF: **ARTEMISIA**

» The Devil Made Liquid

:: By Craig R. Carey

FEW SPIRITS CARRY SO GREAT A STIGMA AS ABSINTHE. Writers and artists the world over have at the same time extolled and condemned its qualities; vinophiles have vilified it before a sagging French wine industry and the drink was ultimately banned in the name of public safety for nearly 70 years in Europe and much of the world. It has only recently been legalized in the United States and many European nations.

Known by several other names—among them the "Green Fairy" and the "Green Goddess"—absinthe is a green, potent distilled spirit often incorrectly termed a *liqueur* (which would indicate sugar is added before bottling). It is flavored with herbs (most notably anise, fennel and wormwood) and typically contains 60 to 75 percent alcohol by volume (120 to 150 proof). Its name is derived from the wormwood (*Artemisia absinthium*) component and its licorice/menthol tastes will remind a drinker of Pernod (appropriately, Monsieur Pernod also marketed France's first commercial absinthe in 1805).

In Barnaby Conrad's *Absinthe: History in a Bottle*, the author draws parallels to the blame cast upon other maligned drinks for social ills in need of a scapegoat. Like gin amongst the British, absinthe enjoyed a time of being regarded as a "patriotic" drink—it had been taken as tonic during the eighteenth-century in its native Switzerland, and was associated with the French colonial army in Algeria in the nineteenth, used as a malaria treatment among *les soldats français*. Under the Second French Empire in the mid-1800s absinthe was associated with the military and bourgeois, lending an air of validity.

It was at the dawn of the Third Republic—once France was suffering the effects of defeat at the end of the Franco-Prussia war in 1870 and Emperor Napoleon III had been deposed—that absinthe began to be associated with the "bohemianism" of poets and painters, and (worse yet) working class alcoholism. This problem was compounded by a near-collapse of the wine industry at the close of the nineteenth century, causing prices to skyrocket and putting wine out of many peoples' reach so absinthe was the next—and far more powerful—choice. While retaining huge popularity among the arts communities of *fin de siècle* Paris, for many it went from celebrated drink to societal enemy in less than a decade.

In his social history *Hideous Absinthe: A History of the Devil in a Bottle*, Jad Adams accounts that "over mere decades absinthe was transformed from the green fairy, muse of artists, hymned by poets, aperitif of the middle class, to the poison of the haggard working class, responsible for all the ills of industrialization." It had become "'the scourge', 'the plague', 'the enemy', 'the queen of poisons', blamed for the near-collapse of France in the first weeks of the Great War and for the decadence threatening the British Empire."

The last dagger in absinthe's back was Switzerland's infamous 1905 Lanfray case, in which a man in a drunken rage killed his wife and children. Jean Lanfray had consumed numerous drinks in heavy quantity, but it was the absinthe that was singled out and blamed. Other nations followed suit, and within ten years the spirit was all but extinct. According to representatives of the US Pure Food Board, absinthe was "one of the worst enemies of man, and if we can keep the people of the United States from becoming slaves to this demon, we will do it."

The chlorophyll in the herbal components of absinthe lends the drink its trademark color, but during its prohibition efforts were made to disguise it as gin, vodka, or other distilled spirits in hopes of passing customs. As a result, clear or blue absinthes were distilled, and even today, some of the best neo-traditional brands produce non-green absinthes (such as Claude-Alain Bugnon's Artemisia; see image).

Absinthe's rise, fall and recent resurrection lay largely with its legend, an image of debauchery and psychoactive influence. It's the wormwood that was long suspected of being the cause of absinthe's purported psychedelic effects. Studies in the 1970s even (erroneously) associated wormwood's chemical

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Absinthe, I adore you truly!
It seems when I drink you,
I inhale the young
forest's soul,
During the beautiful
green season.

—RAOUL PONCHON

>> REBIRTH

The absinthe great Kübler, now again a powerhouse in the industry, led efforts to lobby the Swiss government to lift the absinthe ban and in the US, maintained dialogues with the FDA, Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau, and Customs Bureau. Once these efforts were successful and absinthe was legalized in March 2005 in Switzerland, a number of small clandestine distillers emerged to participate in the born-again industry. One of the first was Artemisia, based along with Kübler and others in the Val-de-Travers region, which is largely considered the heart of absinthe production. In 2007 in the US, Alameda-based St. George Spirits became the first American distiller of absinthe since 1912.

"What difference is there between a glass of absinthe and a sunset?"

—OSCAR WILDE

composition with THC, the active chemical in cannabis. While wormwood does in fact contain thujone, a chemical compound long thought to have hallucinogenic properties, it's commonly accepted that the alcohol in absinthe would render the drinker unconscious—if not dead—long before the trace amounts of thujone could possibly affect an *absintheur*. (Modern studies have determined the brain exhibits minimal, if any, psychoactive response to thujone.)

Phil Baker's *The Book of Absinthe: A Cultural History* makes plain that the drink's image often overshadows the drink itself: "the idea of absinthe has developed a mythology all of its own." As recently as this summer, the debate continued. Findings in the American Chemical Society's May 14, 2008 issue of the *Journal of Agricultural and Food Chemistry* have further reinforced the conclusion that the thujone content in absinthe (and its subsequent effect) is negligible, and that absinthe's power lay solely in its high alcohol content. "Today it seems a substantial minority of consumers want these myths to be true, even if there is no empirical evidence that they are," remarked Dirk Lachenmeier, one of the researchers with the Chemical and Veterinary Investigation Laboratory of Karlsruhe in Germany that conducted the study.

The process of serving absinthe is a ritual unto itself, a simple but meticulous act, and one for which special glasses are available. These glasses have a mark or bulge indicating to what level the absinthe should be poured. A specially-designed slotted spoon is then placed over the glass, a sugar cube placed atop said spoon and chilled water is then poured over this sugar into the glass. This process is known as "louching," and the end ratio of water to absinthe is between 3:1 and 5:1, yielding the pale cloudy green solution so coveted by absintheurs.

In time, as the taking of absinthe became such a hugely popular social practice, the absinthe fountain was conceived. This fountain would reside in the center of a café table, filled with cold water. It possessed anywhere from two to six spigots from which a party of drinkers could slowly drip their desired amount of water into their respective glasses. This was a much easier process than handling a full carafe of iced water. The fountains, slotted spoon, absinthe-specific glasses and other such associated implements are called *absinthiana*.

There are a few absinthe cocktails of note. The simple "absinthe cocktail," an approximation of the louched beverage enjoyed during its long prohibition, consists of 1 oz. Pernod, 1/4 oz. anisette, and 1 oz. water, shaken with ice and garnished with lemon peel. The *panachée*, one of the earliest known absinthe cocktails, uses the same three ingredients, but used equal parts absinthe and anisette. Today, the *panachées* served by French cafés are a different creature—beer mixed with lemonade (known in English-speaking regions as a "chandy").

From Louisiana came the Sazerac (named for the brand of New Orleans cognac originally used, though no longer available). This powerful cocktail combines 1.5 ounces absinthe, 2 ounces cognac (some use rye whisky in lieu), three dashes of bitters and a half-teaspoon sugar, shaken in ice, strained, and again garnished with lemon peel.

Named after the French 75mm artillery cannons of the first World War, the "75" was at times considered more a "fear-preventative" than cocktail. It is comprised of one teaspoonful of absinthe, 2/3 ounce calvados (French apple brandy), and 1/3 ounce gin, again shaken with ice and strained.

Others abound; among them the absinthe martini, the Earthquake, and Ernest Hemingway's own "Death in the Afternoon Cocktail," consisting of a jigger of absinthe poured into a champagne flute and combined with chilled champagne until the drink attains the proper opalescence. Readers of Hemingway may recall that in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Robert Jordan carries a flask of what Hemingway lauds as an "opaque, bitter, tongue-numbing, brain-warming, stomach-warming, idea-changing liquid alchemy."

Santé!

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