ARTEMISIA
DISTILLERIE ARTISANALE
CHARLOT
La Clandestine
ABSINTHE
DU VAL-DE-TRAVERS
MÉTHODE
ANCESTRALE
53% VOL

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