

By Harriet Lembeck



Absinthe Makes the Heart Grow Fonder

Absinthe, the opalescent green, anise-flavored, high-proof spirit, banned worldwide for almost 100 years, is back. What happened with this Van Gogh-turned Rip Van Winkle spirit? Clearly, lots. Why was it banned? How did it get un-banned?

For one thing, the high 69% (138°) alcohol was often mishandled, and the recommended addition of water — anywhere from three to six times the amount of absinthe, was often overlooked. Without water, the proof was dangerously high. There was a lot of pressure against absinthe



Grande Absente Absinthe Originale.

from anti-alcohol groups. Further, the principle flavoring ingredient, *Artemisia absinthium*, or Grand Wormwood, contained *thujone*, which was said to be a carcinogen and/or hallucinogenic at very high concentrations. France banned its sale, and other countries followed suit — saying that if a product was illegal in its own country, then how could it be legal in theirs?

An opening wedge to return absinthe to the world marketplace came with the observation that while France had banned the sale of absinthe, it had never banned its production, and many distilleries had, and still have, been producing similar products all along.

[Note: Absinthe is different from Pastis, the most famous brand of which is Ricard. Pastis has no wormwood, and devotes itself to the anise flavors beloved by the French and their Mediterranean neighbors. Also, the alcohol level is a lower 45%. Pastis has always been permitted, was often used as an absinthe substitute, and kept the distilleries working during the ban on absinthe.]

With today's absinthe, producers, spearheaded by George Rowley, managing director of La Fée Absinthe Parisienne, have proven to the EU that there is no more

than 10 ppm of thujone, which is an acceptable level.

Why the 69% alcohol? I have come across two different answers: one is that there needs to be that much alcohol to keep the oils of the various herbs and spices in solution. What is probably a more practical answer is that French producers need the alcohol percentage to be at least 68% to keep it out of the cordial category, though there are several brands with lower levels. That brings us to the question of where to put it in your store. It turns out that most retailers are putting absinthes on the cordials shelf, regardless of their proof level.

The Absinthe Mystique

Why the mystique? Besides being forbidden for so long, there is the look of the drink in your glass. It's true that water has to be added to reduce the proof, but it's the delivery of that water that contributes to the appeal. If the water is added in small drops, the essential oils in the absinthe start to come out of solution, and go into suspension. A *louche* forms, which is the opalescent swirl that rises in the glass. Or course, you could dump in the water all at once, but the magic is in watching the drink unfold. Further, because wormwood has inherent bitterness, a bit of sugar is customarily added. Simply stirring in the sugar, though, will combine all of the oils and water instantly, which spoils the opalescence. Instead, a sugar cube is placed on a pierced spoon, which, in turn, is placed on top of a glass that contains one part of absinthe. The other 3, 4, 5 or 6 parts of iced water are slowly dripped onto the sugar cube, which begins to dissolve into the chilled water that is coming down into the



Pernod Aux Plantes d'Absinthe Superieur.

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Retail Education



Lucid Absinthe Superieure.

absinthe. This describes the classic “Absinthe Drip” cocktail. It’s beautiful as well as delicious. If you are interested, the website www.versinthe.net shows an animation of the Absinthe Drip, as well as a two-armed and a four-armed fountain — the latter used for making multiple drinks. Marketers have developed many other absinthe cocktails — see the back labels and neckers of the various brands.

Here are some production basics: A foundation of neutral spirits is often distilled from beets. Some come from grain, and California’s St. George Absinthe Verte distills chardonnay and sauvignon blanc grapes to create its clear neutral spirit. Besides the grand wormwood’s principle flavoring, you will often find star anise, green anise, aniseed, sweet fennel and mint, and sometimes eucalyptus, sage (salvia), lemon balsam, hyssop, basil, tarragon, meadow sweet, badiane, vervain and stinging nettles. Color may be added to enhance the pale green of grand wormwood. Many absinthes come in black bottles to protect the contents from light.

There are several examples of absinthe on the market. How do you select which ones for your store? How do you advise your customers? How do you sell more than one bottle? To help you make these decisions, I tracked down 11 absinthes that are currently in the New York market for a tasting.

To create a level playing field, I diluted them all individually with 5 parts of water — the classic proportion, bringing the products down to a wine strength. Also, I did not use any sugar cubes, so that I could judge the levels of sweetness and/or bitterness more accurately. I tasted in order of proof, going from 90° to 138°. I did not, and would not, taste any one of them straight.

La Fée Absinthe Parisienne, France, 68% alc.

Packaged with a pierced spoon produced in Sheffield, England. Cheerful bright green-apple color which deepens when added water creates some opacity. Complex hazelnut nose, with less



La Fée Absinthe Parisienne.

pronounced anise. Slightly sweet finish. La Fée is authorized

by the Musée de l’Absinthe in Auvers-sur-Oise, near Paris, which is under the stewardship of founder Marie-Claude Delahaye.

Grande Absente Absinthe Originale, France, 69% alc.

Packaged with a gold-plated pierced spoon. Pale lime-green, clouds into a yellow-green aura. Noticeable anise and fennel, slightly sweet. Slight bite at finish, indicative of higher proof.

Versinthe aux Plantes d’Absinthe Liqueur, France. 45% alc.

Pale yellow, early clouding, then opaque yellow. Strong anise nose and taste, initial sweet impression, with slight bitter finish. Very herbaceous, reminiscent of an herbal liqueur such as Bénédictine.

Le Tourment Vert, France, 50% alc.

Frosted bottle, cap wired on like Champagne. Strip stamp with bottle number. Light aquamarine color, goes to teal blue with water. Delicate anise nose and taste, slight sweetness, gentle mouthfeel. When re-tasted with a lower diluting cut of 3:1, which is the producer’s recommended strength, it became even more aromatic and distinctive.

Kübler Swiss Absinthe Superieure, Switzerland, 53% alc.

Unique water-white color which becomes creamy and pearlized with water. Very attractive, and different from the others. Very dry and spicy with herbal and vegetal notes. Austere when sampled without any sugar.

Mata Hari Absinthe Bohemian, Austria, 60% alc.

Pale green color, which becomes cloudy with the translucent qualities of a yellow-green mother-of-pearl. Distinctive spice character in the nose and mouth of mint and some cinnamon. Unique “confection” style with a long, spicy finish.

St. George Absinthe Verte, California, USA, 60% alc.

The bottle has engraving of a fanciful monkey. A driven cork takes some effort to reclose the bottle. The color of this non-European



Mata Hari Absinthe Bohemian.

entry is light brown with green highlights. The brown comes from chlorophyll from the locally grown plants. (U.S. wormwood is grown by small farmers as far north as Washington state.) With water, there is a lovely iridescence, and the drink becomes golden brown at the base, and greener at the top. The nose is piney with a suggestion of resin. This is very dry, and has an evergreen quality. The bitterness in the finish can handle a bit of sugar.

Lucid Absinthe Superieure, France, 62% alc.

Very pale yellow color which becomes cloudy and pale yellow-white with some green tones. The nose on this one is slightly earthy along with the scents of anise and other herbs. Some initial sweetness yields to a dry finish, with a sense of lightness in the mouth.

La Muse Verte Absinthe Traditionnelle, France, 68% alc.

Pale yellow-green which gains a paler opalescence that looks like white jade at the top when cut with water. Strong anise nose and taste, faintly sweet with a smooth mouthfeel. Slight bitter finish.

Pernod Aux Plantes d’Absinthe Superieur, France, 68% alc.

Pale yellow-green which becomes slightly more yellow and eventually creamy and opaque when cut. Strong

anise and some woody notes, with a slight sweetness. This was the first commercial brand to be sold in France in 2000, labeled “Pernod 68.” (Pernod’s 40% alc./80° wormwood-free absinthe substitute is now called Pernod “Classic.”)

Mythe Absinthe Traditional, France, 69% alc.

Yellow-green, light yellow cloudiness, translucence. Anise, slight woody notes, not too sweet, with some bitterness in the long finish. Strong herbaceous aromas and flavors with some spice. Available in 375 ml and 750 ml bottles.

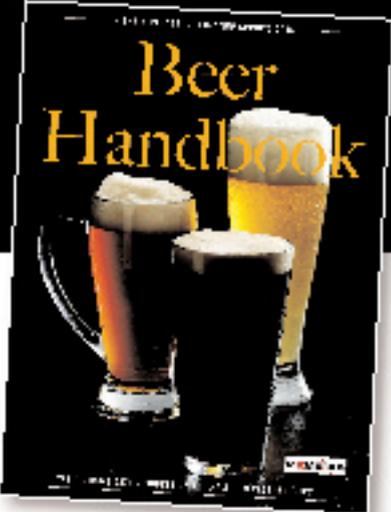
Retailers can create some of their own buzz. Crush Wine & Spirits in New York City recently had an absinthe tasting. Spirits buyers Jason Carson and Daniel Stenson selected four absintnes, which they discounted. They e-mailed their customers before the event, with a follow-up e-mail afterwards. Over 200 people showed up, and Crush did more business in one night than it would have done in a month. Since a little absinthe goes a long way, their only other expenses were sugar cubes and ice to chill the water. The store traffic produced other sales besides.

One caution — please remind your customers to be careful if near an open flame. At these strengths, like an overproof rum, the liquid can be flammable. □

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