

## Absinthe

*After a long absence, the liqueur absinthe is making a comeback. A recent news report noted that the wormwood-based liqueur, long declared illegal in most countries, has become popular in underground circles in Europe and the United States. The drink was popular among artists and writers at the end of the 19th century and has been linked to convulsions, madness, and death.*

Absinthe is an anise-flavored liqueur distilled with oil of wormwood, a leafy herb. Absinthe also contains flavorful herbs such as hyssop, lemon balm, and angelica. Wormwood is *Artemisia absinthum*. The active ingredient is thujone, a neurotoxin. The drink is distinguished by its blue-green clarity, due to its chlorophyll content. It was traditionally served with water and a cube of sugar; the sugar cube was placed on an "absinthe spoon" and the liquor was drizzled over the sugar into the glass of water. The sugar helped take the bitter edge from the absinthe; when poured into the water, the liquor turned milky white.

Wormwood had been used medicinally since the Middle Ages, to exterminate tapeworms in the abdomen while leaving the human host uninjured and even rejuvenated by the experience. At the end of the 18th century, the herb became recreational as people discovered they could get high from it. However, it was unacceptably bitter.

An undocumented distiller found a solution by inventing absinthe, which delivered both the herb and alcohol in a beverage with a flavor resembling licorice. The most well-known maker of absinthe was distiller Henri-Louis Pernod. Absinthe became popular among the cultural community in 1890s Paris, with Vincent Van Gogh, Paul Verlaine, and Oscar Wilde among its most ardent imbibers.

Side effects from consumption of wormwood include renal failure, convulsions, involuntary evacuations, abnormal respiration, and foaming at the mouth. Patients hospitalized in Paris for absinthe intoxication were noted to suffer from seizures, chest effusion, reddish urine, and kidney congestion.

Around the turn of the century, it was noted that heavy absinthe users had a propensity toward madness and suicide. By the 1910s absinthe became banned in the Western world, along with opiates, cocaine, and cannabis. In the United States, it became banned in 1912. Interestingly, however, the current U.S. Customs restrictions on the importation of absinthe only date to 1958. Absinthe is still available in Spain, Portugal, and the Czech Republic, where it is quite trendy among patrons of bars and coffeehouses. It is also legal in Britain and reportedly is available in Andorra and Denmark.

After absinthe was banned, imitations containing anise and other legal herbs in place of wormwood, appeared. The most well known is Pernod, which is very much like absinthe but without the wormwood. The similarity is only in color and taste; Pernod is without the mind-numbing characteristics of absinthe. The practice of adding aromatic bitters to cocktails also derives from a nostalgia for contraband wormwood.

**Source:** *WHAT IS ABSINTHE? And what does it have to do with New Orleans?* by Vicki Richman and Chuck Taggart

## Facts About Absinthe

- The word absinthe is derived from the Greek absinthion, meaning "undrinkable."
- Wormwood is mentioned in the bible a dozen times, including the Revelation of St. John: "And the third part of the waters became wormwood, and many men died of the waters because they became bitter."
- The Russian word for absinthe is chernobyl.
- Leaves of the absinthe plant are an effective deterrent to vermin. Thomas Tusser, in his 1577 book *July's Husbandry*, notes "Where chamber is swept, and wormwood is strown, no flea for his life dare abide to be known."

- Pliny the Elder reported that the champions of Roman chariot races were given a cup of absinthe soaked in wine as a reminder that even victory has its bitter side.
- The "Purl" of Tudor England was a drink composed of hot ale and wormwood. Samuel Pepys mentions drinking it in his diaries.
- At the turn of the century, the Pernod Fils distillery in Pontarlier, France produced 30,000 liters of absinthe a day and shipped it around the world.
- The Pernod plant was struck by lightning in 1901, causing an alcohol fire that raged out of control for four days. Hundreds of thousands of gallons of burning absinthe were discharged into the Doubs River, flavoring it with anise for miles downstream.
- Celebrated absinthe drinkers included the painters Lautrec, Gauguin, Manet, Van Gogh and Picasso, along with the writers Rimbaud, Verlaine, Oscar Wilde, Edgar Allen Poe and Jack London.
- Thujone, the principal active ingredient in absinthe, is chemically similar to THC, and is thought to attach to the same receptors in the brain.

Source: *Absinthe, History in a Bottle*, by Barnaby Conrad III (1988, Chronicle Books)

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