

Absinthe Was Once Banned For Being Evil—Now It's Just Meh

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Drink with wicked aura has no green fairy, just a licorice flavor; 'my mom might like it'

BY DAVID MARCELIS

During its heyday in the 19th century, absinthe was one of the world's most popular liquors—a fixture on bar menus from Paris to New Orleans and a particular favorite among artists.

It was long rumored to cause hallucinations: Oscar Wilde said he once saw flowers spring up around him at a cafe while drinking it. Some say it even influenced Vincent van Gogh's decision to slice his ear off.

Absinthe's detractors (including the wine industry) vilified the spirit, and a grisly family murder in Switzerland that was blamed on absinthe sealed its fate. A top U.S. official called the herbal liquor "one of the worst enemies of man."

The resulting ban, which began in 1912, removed absinthe from U.S. shelves, but it wasn't necessarily bad for its romantically wicked image. By the time scientists cleared it of wrongdoing, allowing it to be reinstated in 2007, adven-

turous drinkers were eager for a taste.

Ten years later, they have reached a verdict: *meh*.

"It was a tough swallow," said Sean Connors, a 43-year-old attorney who tried absinthe in the Czech Republic, one of the few places it was still found, before the U.S. ban was lifted. He said he ordered the drink hoping he would hallucinate. He didn't. "I was just left with a licorice-tasting liquor," he said. "My mom might like it."

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Bartenders weren't crazy about the drink's elaborate serving ritual, which involves pouring a measure of absinthe into a glass and balancing a sugar cube on a slotted spoon over the rim. Ice water is then dripped through the sugar from a specially made decanter called a "fountain" to dilute the drink—most absinthes are about 120 proof.

"The guests weren't always super into it," said Dave Kaplan, one of the founders of the bar Death & Co in New York's East Village, who said the excitement only lasted about six months. A big turnoff was absinthe's strong anise taste, which is similar to black licorice. "Most of the time," Mr. Kaplan said, "the drinks would go unfinished."

Bartender Tyson Buhler said instead of a fountain service, Death & Co now offers a jug of sweetened water for customers to pour as they please. Even so, he said most customers first try the extremely high-proof drink neat. "It's a jarring experience for a lot of people," he said. "I

don't see it becoming the next bourbon."

Last year, U.S. absinthe sales were 42% lower than in 2008—the first full year the spirit was reauthorized—according to research firm IWSR. Absinthe experts say they don't believe the numbers fully reflect a market mostly composed of small local players, but they acknowledge overall sales are indeed likely to be lower than a decade ago.

Brian Robinson of the Wormwood Society, a nonprofit focused on dispelling myths about the spirit, said bars are mostly to blame for lagging sales. The Virginia financial adviser said that out of the 200-plus places where he has tried absinthe, "maybe three or four of them served it properly. Maybe you only dilute it one to one, or you serve it straight, or you set it on fire—nobody likes that because it doesn't taste good."

The fire-setting ritual originated in the Czech Republic. Many Americans had their first experience with absinthe in Prague bars in the 1990s.

Hali Barnett, a bartender at Lovecraft in the East Village, said her bar offers the fire ritual mostly due to popular de-

mand. Customers who favor it tend to be in their early 20s, she said. She usually warns guests requesting it that she is about to burn most of the alcohol out of the drink, but she doesn't try to dissuade them further. "They just want to get smashed," she said.

Absinthe's herbal ingredients, which include grand wormwood, green anise and fennel, may be part of the problem. William Elliott, bar director at Maison Premiere in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, said anise isn't a flavor many Americans are familiar with. "All over the world, it's a major component in baking, confections and alcohol," he said. "Only America has this big childhood problem of disliking the flavor."

In France, while the flavor is popular, drinkers have mostly moved on to a similar-tasting spirit—pastis. Even though absinthe is for sale again in France, few there are switching back. "It's easy to lose a taste for something that hasn't been around for a century," said Marc Thuillier, a Frenchman who runs two websites about absinthe.

Jeremy King, a 30-year-old firefighter from Lakewood,



Bartender Hali Barnett serves absinthe at Lovecraft in New York.

Ohio, said he first wanted to try absinthe after watching "EuroTrip," a 2004 comedy featuring a group of American teenagers crisscrossing Europe. Shortly after downing shots of absinthe in a Bratislava nightclub, some characters see a green fairy—as the spirit is often called—flying around them.

"It wasn't the same," Mr. King said, after he bought a bottle and tried it at home. All absinthe did was "get you really

drunk," he said.

Absinthe was originally believed to be psychedelic, and toxic, because of thujone, a compound found in grand wormwood—or *Artemisia absinthium*, after which the spirit is named—but also in many other herbs, including sage and oregano.

It is a myth that thujone is hallucinogenic, said Ted Breaux, an absinthe distiller and founder of Jade Liqueurs. The

former chemist, who played a key role in getting the spirit reauthorized in the U.S., said the compound is a convulsant, but studies that he co-wrote showed absinthe contains only a trace amount, even in pre-ban varieties.

"The sage in your Thanksgiving stuffing will give you more thujone than any normal absinthe," the Wormwood Society's Mr. Robinson said.

Mr. Breaux said the resurgence of classic cocktails has helped the sales of absinthe. He said the Savoy Cocktail Book, a 1930 publication that serves as many bartenders' bible, features dozens of drinks that call for absinthe.

Mr. Elliott, the bar director at Maison Premiere, said he is introducing absinthe to patrons by using it in a broad range of cocktails where it is the dominant ingredient.

"We have an absinthe piña colada on the menu," he said. When the drink was introduced about five years ago, "I was sort of rolling my eyes," he said. Today, it is one of Maison Premiere's most popular. "You have to tempt people to enjoy something that they haven't historically enjoyed," he said.

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