

ABSINTHE! Part I - The Bottles

The return of la Fee Verte - "The Green Faerie"

By Cecil Munsey

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By late morning the professors of absinthe were already at their station, yes, the teachers of absinthe, for it is a science, or rather an art to drink absinthe properly, and certainly to drink it in quantity. They put themselves on the trail of the novice drinkers, teaching them to raise their elbow high and frequently, water their absinthe artistically, and then, after the tenth little glass, with the pupil rolled under the table, the master went on to another, always drinking, always holding forth, always steady and unshakeable at his post."

Absinthe et Absintheurs by Henri Balesta

Introduction:

Absinthe, in its heyday during the 1880-1915 ("Belle Époque" or "beautiful era"), was an immensely popular beverage enjoyed by artists and writers. The anise-flavored liquor was eventually portrayed, *perhaps unfairly*, as dangerously addictive and psychoactive. It is worth mentioning that wine and absinthe were not always thought to be inimical (hostile). In those earlier times, just the opposite was true. Absinthe was said by some to intensify the power of wine, "*absinthe is the spark that explodes the gunpowder of wine.*" Anti-absinthe agitation finally won out and Switzerland banned absinthe in 1905, followed by the United States in 1912 and France in 1915. Countries in which absinthe remained legal, such as Spain, Portugal and Czechoslovakia, reported no epidemic of madness and violence attributable to its use – it can still be purchased today in grocery chains in the Czech Republic and in liquor stores in Denmark, Sweden, New Zealand, Japan and Britain.

In the early 1900s, English medical journals reported that they couldn't tell any difference between alcoholism and absinthism. Soon absinthe was hardly drunk in Britain, and it was not thought necessary to ban it. Bars and restaurants in Britain began serving it recently when they discovered it had never been formally banned in the country.

In December of 2007, after years of badgering by beverage companies' legal teams, the U.S. lifted its ban. All Americans now can indulge in the spirit

nicknamed "the green fairy."

But a night with *Lucid*, *Kubler* or *St. George* – the three absinthe brands so far allowed to be sold in the U.S. – is merely a date with a spirit whose alcohol content (sometimes as high as 70% – 140 proof) beats vodka. What is now sold in the U.S. simply isn't the real stuff that is legend in history. Absinthe sold here must contain less than **10 ppm** (parts per million) of **thujone**, a chemical found in the herb wormwood, a traditional ingredient of absinthe. Thujone in high concentrations is extremely toxic. The supposed psychotropic effect of **pre-ban absinthe** is attributed to thujone levels of **60 ppm or more**, far past current legal limits 10 ppm in the U.S. and the European Union. However, some recent tests of pre-ban absinthes by a food chemist and a distiller revealed results that fell below 35 ppm. It wasn't a cheap series of tests to make since the 100-year old pre-ban full bottles currently sell online, starting at \$1,000 and go up to \$6,000 or more.

History of absinthe

Wormwood, a woody shrub with a bitter aromatic taste, has long been used as an ingredient of vermouth and absinthe and in medicine. The earliest recorded use of wormwood (**Figure 1**) comes from the Ebers Papyrus, copies of which date from 1550 B.C., but which include writings from 3550 B.C. To the



Figure 1

Egyptians, wormwood had religious as well as medicinal significance. Wormwood is mentioned seven times in the King James' version of the bible. Pliny's *Hisotria Naturalis*, written in the first century A.D., describes extracts of wormwood as being of great antiquity (even then) and having longstanding utility against gastrointestinal worms (hence the name). Thujone does indeed stun roundworms, which are then expelled by normal peristaltic action of the intestine.

A more recent version of the story of absinthe involves some controversy as to its lineage. Most historians agree the modern version of absinthe can be traced back to the modest Swiss laboratory of Pierre Ordinaire, a resourceful French doctor who'd fled to Switzerland in the wake of the French Revolution.

In **1792**, he combined local herbs, wormwood, anise, fennel, angelica, hyssop and possibly mint and spinach, in an alcohol base. He prescribed and sold the 136-proof concoction as a cure-all known for its digestive-aiding and parasite-dispelling qualities – as a proprietary medicine, in other words. It soon garnered the nickname the la Fee Verte (the Green Faerie) due to its translucent hue and the strange effect it had on its imbibers. The doctor's only proof that it worked as a health tonic was his patients kept coming back for it, and the way Pierre figured it, the customer was always right.

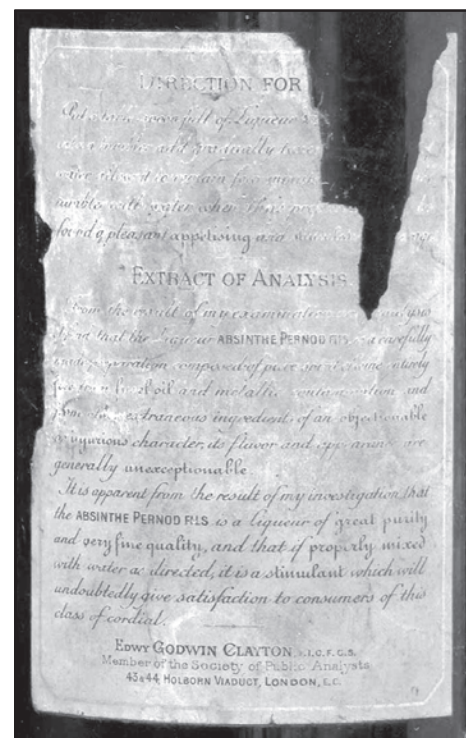


Figure 6



It remained a local remedy for small-town ailments until Henri-Louis Pernod, founder of the famed Pernod Fils distillery, acquired the recipe by a fortuitous marriage and began producing large quantities of absinthe in **1797** in Couvet, Switzerland, before moving to a larger Pontarlier, France facility in **1805**. (For a capsule-history of Pernod, see “*The Fire*” later in this article.)

It didn’t catch on as something you’d confidently order in a café until it was issued to French soldiers fighting Muslim insurgents in Algeria in the **1840s**. They used it to spike their canteen water and claimed it was grand for warding off tropical fever, dysentery and harmful bacteria and “to recruit exhausted strength.” When the boys came victoriously marching home, they apparently brought their fear of fever and germs back to France, where they found it was also good

for warding off sobriety and the dissatisfaction of civilian life.

The intellectual elite of Paris soon became enchanted – some say enslaved – by the Faerie’s strange charms. The potent liquor’s reputation and use spread rapidly among artists, writers and professional café habitués, who claimed it raised their perceptions and consciousness, allowing them to turn out more inspired work. [Figures 2-4]

Secrets of the Faerie

“The first stage is like ordinary drinking, the second when you begin to see monstrous and cruel things, but if you can persevere you will enter in upon the third stage where you see things that you want to see, wonderful curious things.”

—Oscar Wilde



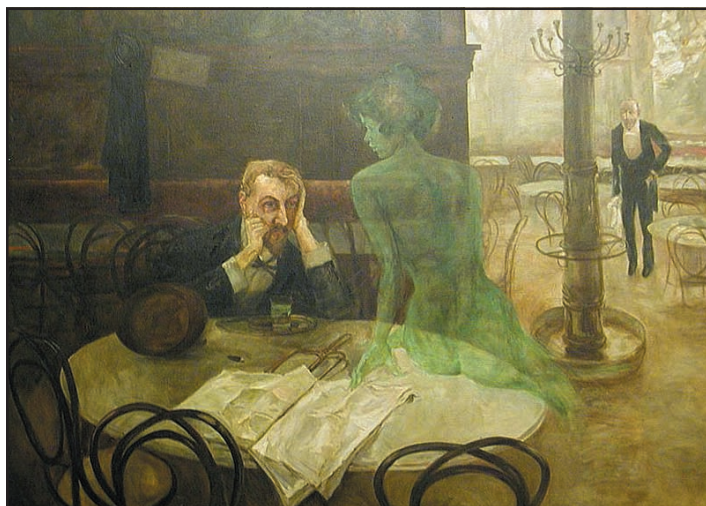


Figure 9

The power and attraction of absinthe lies in its inherent contradictions. Though fortified with a formidable measure of alcohol, a depressant, it is also infused with powerful herbal stimulants, creating a psychic tug of war in the mind of the imbiber. Alcohol relaxes inhibitions and invites in new ideas, and the stimulants allow you to logically process the new data.

Foremost of the stimulants is thujone, the psychoactive chemical at the heart of the herb wormwood, which, along with anisette, gives absinthe its bitter, black liquorish taste. Subsequently, absinthe provides a level of clarity not usually associated with alcoholic drinks, and what artist could pass that up? [Figures 5-8]

With the promise of inspiration, clarity and getting drunk, it was no wonder it became a favorite. To say absinthe was a major influence and inspiration of the artists of the Impressionist Movement is not such an outrageous claim when one considers most of the movement's pioneers and stars swore loyalty to the liquor. Edouard Manet, Arthur Rimbaud, Charles Baudelaire, Alfred Jarry, Vincent Van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, Edgar Degas, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Viktor Oliva and Pablo Picasso were all heavy users, and if asked, they would tell you they needed the narcotic properties of absinthe to get out of their head enough to render art that had never even been thought of by more conventional artists. Oliva, the Czech painter and illustrator, (1861-1928) painted the "*Absinthe Drinker*" (Czech: *Piják absintu*), his most famous painting (Figure 9) that became for some the visual anthem for the absinthe era. Lautrec carried his supply of absinthe in a hollowed-out walking stick with a reservoir of absinthe so that he would never be without the green faerie. [Collectors will be delighted to know that the walking stick is preserved in the Toulouse-Lautrec Museum in Albi, France]. Jarry paid homage to absinthe by painting himself green. Verlaine's presumptuous manner of saying hello became, "*I take sugar with it!*" Van Gogh was probably the most prolific user, not to mention the most demented; when he couldn't get a hold of a bottle he'd sometimes drink turpentine as a substitute. It – the absinthe, not the turpentine – inspired his later painting. It also inspired him to cut his earlobe off.

Well-educated people interested in literature (*literati*) of the time found absinthe useful as well. Writers such as Paul Verlaine, Arthur Rimbaud, Edgar Allan Poe, Oscar Wilde, Mary Shelly (she wrote *Frankenstein* while under the influence of the Faerie), and later, Ernest Hemingway, Somerset Maugham and Jack London



Figure 10

Figure 12



Figure 11

in 1920. He fell head-over-heels in love with the Faerie, continued the habit in Paris (though it was illegal at the time), and then carried the practice home to the U.S. He smuggled bottles from Spain and Cuba and kept it by his typewriter as a means of instant inspiration (Figure 12).

In his own words:

"The absinthe made everything seem better. I drank it without sugar in the dripping glass, and it was pleasantly bitter. I poured the water directly into it and stirred it instead of letting it drip. I stirred the ice around with a spoon in the brownish, cloudy mixture. I was very drunk. I was drunker than I ever remembered having been."

—Ernest Hemingway

Ernest Dowson, an English poet of the group called the Decadents, was an absinthe user who was in empathy with the bohemian *literati* across the Channel in Paris. He consumed the



Figure 13

were all enthusiastic disciples of the la Fee Verte. Hemingway wrote a large body of his work under the faerie's influence, and it's no wonder his short stories and novels are steeped in the stuff. His characters ordered it by the bottle and drank it for entertainment, enlightenment, and sometimes as a makeshift barrier between the presence and memories of war and women they wished to forget. [Figures 10-11]

Hemingway took his first taste while visiting Spain

green faerie in large quantities, regularly went to music halls and restaurants, and liberally had sex with prostitutes. In 1889, in a letter to a friend, he quipped, "... *absinthe makes the tart grow fonder*." He is best remembered, however, for some other vivid phrases, such as "... *days of wine and roses*" from his poem "Viae Summa Bevis." Another of his well-remembered phrases is "... gone with the wind...."

Absinthe comes to America

Absinthe soon found its way to the "Little Paris of North America," New Orleans. The drink, which was spelled "*absinthe*" in an 1837 New Orleans liquor advertisement, enjoyed a vogue under such brand names as *Green Opal*, *Milky Way*, and *Herbsaint* (Today, one can still find a version of this made without wormwood and marketed under the name Herb Sainte).

Of all the ancient buildings in New Orleans's famed French Quarter, none has been more glorified by drunks and postcard photographers alike than a square, plaster and brick structure at the corner of Bourbon and Bienville streets. "The Old Absinthe House" (Figure 13) with its scarred cypress bar was visited by many famous people: Oscar Wilde, Lafcadio Hearn, William Thackeray, Walt Whitman, Aaron Burr, and General P.G.T. Beauregard are just a few of the many who relaxed over a green absinthe in this shady retreat. Alexis, Grand Duke of all Russians, drank there, and the chairs once creaked under William Howard Taft's presidential bulk. The great writer, O. Henry, was just a struggling newspaperman named William Sidney Porter when he came to dream over an absinthe frappé.

The building was constructed in 1806 by two Spanish importers. It continued as a commission house for various foodstuffs until 1820, when it was turned into an *épicerie*, and then a boot shop. Finally, in 1846, the ground floor corner room became a saloon known as "Aleiz's Coffee House." In 1874, the place was renamed the "Absinthe Room" because of the numerous requests for the drink which was served in the Parisian manner.

Absinthe was also drunk in San Francisco, Chicago and New York, which had a popular restaurant called the Absinthe House. Up until 1912, many of the more exotic bars in New York would serve an absinthe cocktail. One can imagine a piano player at one of these watering holes



Figure 14



Figure 15

singing this Victor Herbert melody with lyrics by Glenn MacDonough:

I will free you first from burning thirst
That is born of a night of the bowl,
Like a sun 'twill rise through the inky skies
That so heavily hangs o'er your souls.
At the first cool sip on your fevered lip
You determine to live through the day,
Life's again worthwhile as with a dawning smile
You imbibe your absinthe frappé.

But on July 13, 1907, *Harper's Weekly* noted, "The growing consumption in America of absinthe, '*the green curse of France*,' has attracted the attention of the Department of Agriculture, and an investigation has been ordered to determine to what extent it is being manufactured in this country." Just five years later, on July 25, 1912, the Department of Agriculture issued Food Inspection Decision 147, which banned absinthe in America.

The only problem was the price

In pre-ban France, the only problem was price. Initially it was only monied socialites and artists who could afford absinthe. The bourgeoisie were relegated to the sidelines. Capitalism hates a vacuum, however, and a plethora of distilleries popped up almost overnight. To keep prices low and profits high, they deliberately avoided using the superior

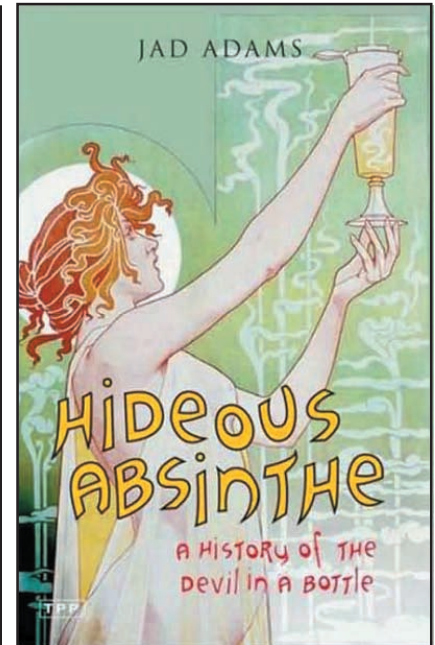


Figure 19

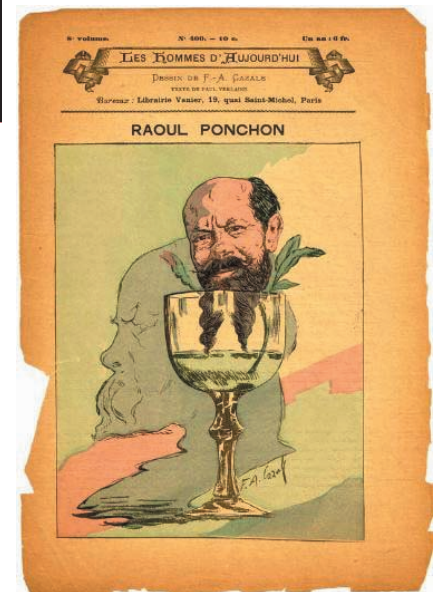


Figure 20

distilled wine-based Pernod and switched to cheaper grain and potato alcohol (vodka). They cranked it out as fast as possible and still the demand rose.

The expansion of absinthe was further aided by a severe wine shortage

France's vines were saved by Thomas V. Munson and Hermann Jaeger, two Americans, who shipped carloads of American phylloxera-resistant vine roots to France during the 1870s. Onto those roots the Old World wine grapes were grafted, thus saving them from the phylloxera scourge.

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that swept France, the consequence of the grape blight *phylloxera* (a plant louse) that had decimated the nation's vineyards.

With the price of wine skyrocketing because of the shortage and the price of absinthe plunging, the bourgeois jumped in wholesale. The working class soon followed, finding the community of the "green hour" and powerful effects of absinthe a perfect counterweight to the mundane drudgery of the factory jobs offered by the Industrial Revolution.

Furthermore, absinthe became one of the first liquors to crack the gender barrier, much as the speakeasies did during America's bout with prohibition. Unlike the established and conservative liquor companies, the young people of the absinthe trade, eager for radical change, directed advertising at women. Consequently, absinthe cafes and clubs promoted a level of drinking equality previously unknown in France. [Figures 14-15]

By the mid-1870s, the "green hour" had become a daily ritual at many of Paris' 366,000 bars and cafes. From 1875 to 1913, the annual consumption of absinthe per inhabitant in France increased fifteen times; by the 1913 ban, drinkers were consuming 10.5 million gallons a year. The French referred to this wild era as "the great collective binge," for it seemed as if the entire nation was drunk on absinthe.

The fire

On August 11, 1901, a devastating fire swept through the Pernod factory. It was not completely extinguished until four days later, and it took the firm over a year to resume full production (Figures 16-17).

In 1913, when the sale of absinthe was



Figure 16



Figure 17

banned in France, the Pernod factory was turned into an Army hospital to care for the soldiers of World War I (Figure 18). The Pernod distillery was sold in 1917 after 110 years of production.

By 1920, anise-based drinks were legalized again in France, allowing Pernod to reestablish its business and produce refined blends of herbs but not absinthe. The formula was modified, resulting in Pernod® as we know it today – a 40% alcohol (80 proof) anise-flavored spirit. Its distinctive flavor is created through a



Figure 18



Figure 21

combination of star anise and several aromatic herbs and plants.

Pernod became available worldwide in 1959. Today the drink is distributed in nearly 170 countries.

Why should bottle collectors care?

Collectors of bottles should care because obtaining bottles originally used to contain the Green Faerie are available to those who search long and hard enough – a characteristic well known to most bottle collectors.

Another answer to that obvious question is, absinthe bottles are rare and valuable, historic and resplendent with examples of the some of the world's finest lithography on their labels as can be seen throughout this article.

As will be seen in Part II of this two-part effort, there is much more than absinthe bottles for collectors to consider. The culture of the "green faerie" was immense and resulted in many trappings associated with the creation and use of absinthe – memorabilia or paraphernalia.

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**More than 1200 free-to-copy
well-researched articles
and other materials of interest to
bottle collectors**

Figure 19: Hideous Absinthe, a history of the devil in the bottle (Jeff Adams, University of Wisconsin Press, 2004)

Figure 20: Five O'Clock Absinthe, a book about Raoul Ponchon (1848-1937), author of 150,000 verses, some about absinthe.

Figure 21: Maison Pernod Fils of Paris, 1896 catalogue.