

The Absinthe fountain and spoons are the traditional way to enjoy the spirit.



The Presence of Absinthe



The mystique-filled elixir has evolved into a full-blown spirits category, populated with brands that balance herbs and spices with a storied history and a promising future.

By Elyse Glickman

The only way adventurous U.S. drinkers could get a hold of absinthe prior to 2007 was to take their chances and order it online, or convince a friend visiting Europe to slip a bottle past customs. However, it was only a matter of time before absinthe would re-emerge in the open, especially with origins and history that would add to its legend through the years.



The mix of herbs and spices distinguishing absinthe from other spirits reads on paper as a harvest of wonderful things coming from nature—grand wormwood and anise as the anchors, and fennel, hyssop, veronica, lemon balm, angelica, dittany, coriander, juniper and nutmeg completing the lineup. When these components were mixed and distilled, however, the result took on an unexpected new life. The strong liquor, originally developed in Switzerland for medical purposes, captured the imagination of artists and writers in Europe during the “Belle Époque” of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

While these imbibers dubbed the spirit “The Green Fairy” and adopted it as their creative muse, there were others who saw the green liquid as a menace to society. The Mediterranean perennial herb *Artemisia absinthium* (Grand Wormwood) at the heart of absinthe was source for the chemical compound thujone, rumored to bring about hallucinations and other side effects. Though a major wine shortage in France at the end of the 19th century contributed to the growth of absinthe and other hard liquors, legal authorities and moral watchdogs blamed a lot of the world’s social ills on the strong herbal spirit. Prohibition in the United States, meanwhile, seemed to seal the misunderstood spirit’s fate on our shores as a curiosity.

Many spirits enthusiasts and historically savvy bartenders are familiar with Pernod Fils, devised over two centuries ago and touted to be the muse of choice for the big names of the Belle Époque, including Picasso, Monet, Toulouse-Lautrec and Van Gogh. Though the original Pernod (which some say had the “most authentic” of recipes) and its contemporaries disappeared after the French government and other nation’s governments banned it, its memory lived on for years. Today, tradition was recently revitalized, in the form of Pernod Absinthe. However, the story doesn’t end there, or with that brand. Today, legend has given way to a new category and a fascinating phenomenon.

The spirit that was once a mystery, enhanced by pop culture (i.e. movies such as 2001’s *Moulin Rouge*), would be revealed a century later, and in many different formats once the ban (or bans, depending on your perspective) were lifted. In turn, brands such as *Lucid Absinthe Supérieure*, *St. George Absinthe Verte*, *Nouvelle-Orléans Absinthe Supérieure*, *La Clandestine Absinthe Supérieure*, *Kübler, Grande Absente Originale*, *Le Tourment Vert*, *Artemisia Absinthe*, *Obsello Absinthe*, *La Fée Parisienne*, *Green Fairy*, *Mansinthe* by Marilyn Manson, *Mythe Absinthe Traditional*, *Libertine*, *Mata Hari Absinthe Bohemian* and (of course) *Pernod* have brought the absinthe mystique out into bars, restaurants and homes across America.

Now that absinthe is legal, here are some new classics that mixologists are creating with the green fairy.

MINT MUSE

1 ½ oz. Lucid Absinthe Supérieure
2 oz. Pineapple Juice
Muddled Mint Leaves
Lime Wedge
Topped with Sprite or 7-UP



Muddle mint leaves with lime wedge and add Lucid. Add ice and pineapple juice and shake briefly. Top with Sprite or 7-UP and add mint sprig.

OL' LUCY BLUE EYES

1 oz. Stoli blueberry
¼ oz. Lucid Absinthe Supérieure
¼ oz. Simple Syrup
Splash of Lemon Juice
Drizzle of Massenez
Framboise
Gingerbeer
Fresh Blueberries



Muddle fresh blueberries and add syrup, juice and vodka. Add ice and shake and pour into highball glass. Drizzle Framboise and top with Ginger Beer. Garnish with one sugar cube.

VAN GOGH'S GARDEN

1 ½ oz. Lucid Absinthe Supérieure
½ oz. Simple Syrup
Club Soda
Kiwi Fruit
Cucumber



Muddle two cucumber wheels & two peeled kiwi wheels with the simple syrup in a double rocks glass. Fill with ice and add the Lucid. Top with club soda and add an un-peeled kiwi wheel on the rim.

ABSENTE FRENCH FIZZ

1 oz. Grande Absente
1 oz. Alize (passion)
¼ oz. of Pineapple Juice
½ oz. of Sweet & Sour
Club Soda

Shake until freezing cold, and strain contents into a martini glass. Garnish with a pineapple wedge and/or maraschino cherry.



A New “Epoque” Begins



Though many web sites on absinthe note the U.S. ban on the spirit was lifted in early 2007, products labeled legally as absinthe have appeared as early as 2000. Absente, according to Jim Nikola, Senior VP of Marketing at Crillon Importers, was the brand that set the foundation because they found a way to bring an absinthe made with a legal sister botanical, southern wormwood, into the U.S. legally with the help of lawyers, with the standard that thujone content would remain under ten parts per million. He also points out that Absente is now made with grand wormwood.

“By 2004-5, entrepreneurial types aware of our legal dialogue with the government established that the ban on wormwood could be lifted under the legal guideline our company created that stipulates thujone remain under ten parts per million, and that’s when we started to see an emergence of products claiming to be wormwood absinthe,” observes Nikola. “We are still in the midst of absinthe’s evolution, and people in the trade need to know that companies like us have been around absinthe for nearly 10 years. Awareness and knowledge in the mainstream is still really low, so it is our job to enlighten them in any way we can. Though you have your trendsetters and market leaders demographically up on absinthe and setting the pace, as well as the art community, the mainstream is still learning about what it was, what it is and what it tastes like, how to drink it. When we first started in 2000, nobody knew what absinthe was, so we’ve come a long way since then, but we have



In 1805, Henri-Louis Pernod partnered with Major Dubied to found Pernod Fils and the first commercial absinthe distillery.

so much farther to go. When you visit different states and go on premise, there are still many people who don’t know what it is and need a lot of explanation and training. We capitalized on the foundations we laid in 2007 with the launch of Grande Absente, one of the oldest absinthe recipes from the south of France, taking our legal precedent to the next stage.”

Though absinthe is now a spirits category in the open and in its own right, T.A. Breaux, the Master Distiller of Lucid Absinthe Supérieure and strong voice for Viridian Spirits’ portfolio (also including Nouvelle-Orléans Absinthe Supérieure and La Clandestine Absinthe Supérieure), points out that trade buyers and consumers should still make their purchasing decisions carefully. “There is currently no legal definition for Absinthe in the U.S. It is unfortunate because it allows unscrupulous profiteers to put green liquid in a bottle—mouthwash, basically—and charge people \$50 a bottle or more,” Breaux stresses. “To distinguish our products we are emphasizing that anything Viridian puts out is absolutely artisanally distilled and completely natural. There are already products on the market that are making noise, when what’s in the bottle is artificially colored sugary liquid that has no bearing on the Absinthe of 100 years ago. We have to be concerned with educating our customers, pointing out everything we distill comes from whole herbs and is made with an expensive painstaking process that justifies their price and place in the market.”

Jared Gurfein, Lucid Absinthe Supérieure’s founder and CEO, adds that while Lucid Absinthe Supérieure was the first absinthe on the U.S. market, it is one of the few whose recipe is truly authen-



Wormwood plants adjacent to a, circa 1870s, absinthe still in the historical Combiér distillery where Nouvelle-Orléans and Lucid are distilled.



Photo of two antique absinthe stills at the Combiér distillery.



tic in every detail of how it is made. “That alone has given us a tremendous competitive advantage,” he says. “Even with the hype from other distillers, it has not hurt our position in the category. We just stuck to our guns and made sure trade clients and consumers know Lucid Absinthe Supérieure is one of a small number of brands around the world that can truly claim to be authentic as a true expert would say. No matter how much money a competitor wants to throw at a product, at the end of the day, people who know what’s going on are going with the quality, and they are sticking with it. This has been our secret.”

Lance Winters, distiller of St. George Absinthe Verte, notes that while absinthe’s appeal as a complex spirit has not changed, it has shaken off some of the horrible myths and reputation as people become more familiar with it, especially thanks to well-crafted cocktails. “It is finding a place in the bartender’s lexicon, especially as they are more sophisticated today and work with flavors in many remarkable ways,” says Winters. “Absinthe serves two functions. Some customers enjoy the traditional absinthe drip with water, while others use this very layered herbal liquor as they would with Chartreuse, to elevate the flavor and aromatic elements of a cocktail beautifully. It’s a great supporting player for a variety of innovative cocktails. When you have eleven or twelve really loud flavors and aromas and every single one wants to dominate, to be able to get all of them to integrate and play nicely on the palate, that’s where the real art for the distiller comes in, knowing exactly how much to use of each element and focusing on each flavor accordingly.”

For other brands, such as Mata Hari, Obsello and Le Tourment Vert, distillers and their marketing teams face the challenge of straddling the authenticity question with formulas that contain the components but appeal to the modern American palate.

“Mata Hari, made in Vienna, Austria is made in the bohemian style,” explains Steve Raye, who is responsible for marketing the brand in the U.S. “Bohemian refers to a style of Absinthe with a less-dominant licorice profile. The recipe was developed by distiller Gerry Fischer’s great-grandfather Friedrich Fischer. The original handwritten formula dates to 1881 and is kept in the family safe. What characterizes Mata Hari is a lighter flavor and body profile, with less of a dominant licorice flavor, making it easier to mix in cocktail recipes. Though the distiller makes absinthe using a variety of absinthe recipes, we chose this one because it is the most mixable. This is what we found to be the way many Americans getting to know absinthe want to enjoy the spirit. People



“Absinthe is the hot new ‘old’ spirit, with the distinctive flavors of anise and herbs distinguishing them from industrial modern spirits.”

– T.A. Breaux,

Master Distiller of Lucid Absinthe Supérieure



start off trying absinthe the traditional way, with the slotted spoon allowing it to louche (get the cloudy color people associate with absinthe). It was never meant to be consumed straight, but be diluted to cocktail strength, 20 to 40 proof.”

Ashley Garver, Le Tourment Vert’s Field Marketing Coordinator, affirms her brand,

though also devised for the American palate (via a lower anise content and lower alcohol content), gets its authenticity from its distillery in Cognac, France and artisanal production methods. “Because it is so versatile, it is very relevant to today’s consumer,” she says. “Bars throughout the country are serving it in a multitude of ways, from the water and sugar method of 100 years ago to inclusion in a variety of cocktails, shots and mixed drinks. Some bars like mixing it with Red Bull and others like to muddle it with raspberries and cucumbers and take a modern twist on older traditional cocktails. It is a real absinthe experience, formulated with the 21st century customer in mind.”

Spanish-made Obsello uses its cache as a favorite among an elite group of fine restaurants and bars to introduce connoisseurs and retailers everywhere else to its twice-distilled formula, made in traditional alembic stills using an un-aged brandy base from Penedès wine stock. While honey and vanilla undertones balance out the grand wormwood base, resulting in a noticeable lack of bitterness, and a velvet-y mouth feel. Some of the award-winning establishments offering Obsello include Hungry Cat in Los Angeles and Michael Minna’s establishment in San Francisco and were chosen based on their reputations for superb culinary or mixology talents, service and ambiance.

“We started with baby steps and are now taking huge strides to make the micro-distillery into a world-class spirits producer and to provide products to consumers who have been asking for more than just another drink,” said Joanne Haruta, Obsello’s Director of U.S. Sales and Marketing. “We think we have given consumers something they have wanted for a long time: head-turning taste and unforgettable experience. We’ve conducted taste sampling for hundreds of food and beverage products, but never before have we seen this amount of interest for one single product.” Added said Kimberly

"It is finding a place in the bartender's lexicon, especially as they are more sophisticated today and work with flavors in many remarkable ways,"

— Lance Winters, St. George Absinthe Verte

BOHEMIAN MOJITO

Developed with Bryce Hardy of the "Olive Bar", Hartford, CT

- 1 oz. Absinthe Mata Hari
- 1 oz. Bacardi Limon
- 6-8 mint leaves
- 2 lime wedges
- 2 dashes Simple Syrup
- Soda Water to top



Throw the mint leaves in the bottom of a collins glass. Squeeze in the juice of two lime wedges, and add the wedges to the shaker. Add the simple syrup and muddle. Add the remaining ingredients and tumble. Return to collins glass. Top with soda water and garnish with a generous sprig of mint.

CHERRY LIFESAVER

- 1 oz. Absinthe Mata Hari
- 1 ½ oz. Cherry Vodka
- 1 oz. Cointreau
- 1 oz. Cranberry Juice



Combine ingredients in a cocktail shaker filled with ice and shake thoroughly. Strain into a chilled cocktail glass and garnish with a cherry

BELLE EPOQUE

By Erik Adkins, Slanted Door, San Francisco, CA

- 1/8 oz. St. George Absinthe Verte
- 1 ½ oz. Tanqueray 10
- ¾ Fresh Lime
- ½ oz. Simple Syrup

Put all ingredients into a mixing glass. Add ice and shake. Strain into a martini-cocktail glass.

MY OWN SUMMER

- 1 oz. Le Tourment Vert
- ¾ oz. Hangar One Kaffir Lime Vodka
- 1 Barspoon Simple Syrup
- ½ oz. Lemon Juice
- ½ Lime Juice
- 1 oz. Kiwi Puree
- 1 oz. Aloe Water

Put all ingredients into a mixing glass. Add ice and shake. Served up in a martini glass.



The traditional absinthe drip with water and slotted spoon allows it to *louche* (get the cloudy color people associate with absinthe).

Bulilis, Distillery Brand Manager of Vegas Market, "Where some of the more notorious brands are fading along with their brief moment in the spotlight, we think this is just the beginning for Obsello."

What Becomes the Legend Most...



While absinthe, with its strong licorice flavor and alcohol content, remains an acquired taste, the producers and their teams have different notions on how to get clients and consumers to acquire it. "There is a process people go through in learning to enjoy absinthe," says Mata Hari's Raye. "In the beginning, people find they are familiar with it via pop culture, and awareness of it being illegal in America at one time. Some may try it in the drip format of 100 years ago, and there is the risk they may abandon the category if they don't like licorice. However, what we're finding is that when we include recipes as part of the package or discussion with our accounts when we educate them, there is a greater chance people will be willing to accept it into the repertoire of drinks that they will order."

"It is amazing watching Absinthe's popularity develop," says Lucid Absinthe Supérieure's CEO Gurfein. "I almost want to take a step back to survey the landscape, especially as it has emerged as a drink that means a lot of things to a lot of people. The educated, well-traveled crowd gravitating toward art history embraces Absinthe's place in history. For the arty bohemian crowd, its reputation of being outside of the establishment and

the drink of the avant-garde crowd gives it appeal. There is the shooter crowd who like absinthe's perceived element of dare, and a high-end restaurant-industry crowd including mixologists and trained sommeliers fascinated by the complexity of absinthe. It straddled many different demographics in many different ways, and we couldn't be happier."

According to Crillon Import's Nikola, Grande Absente's approach is to connect both consumers and trade clientele to the product in a way that is upscale and intrinsically connected to absinthe's history. "Absinthe is so fascinating, because it was not only so much a part of the Belle Époque era, but had an influence on the direction of art itself," says Nikola. "We put a big focus on training our reps and our accounts, and teach these people about the history and future of absinthe. Although Absinthe brands in the U.S. market adhere to TTB guidelines, they are remarkably close to the absinthes offered in Belle Epoque Paris. There are a lot of marketing myths around absinthe, so we hope to demystify the category and our brand when explaining its appeal."

St. George Absinthe Verte's Winters, meanwhile, expresses that instead of putting out an absinthe just to be competitive, it is more important to make the product true to what has made absinthe special from the beginning. As a distiller, he feels it is most important to create products that satisfy them as artisanal producers before they put it on the market.

"If something we put out is a hit with the market, then that's great. If not, we still feel that we created something that feeds our souls as distillers," he says. "Absinthe is one of the most complex spirits

Absolutely Absinthe

To preserve the spirit's integrity,
here are some helpful hints.

- Store at a cool, steady temperature, 13 - 18 °C (55 to 65 °F).
- Protect bottles from direct sunlight and vibration.
- Bottles with a cork may be stored on their sides and rotated to insure that the cork remains moist.
- Store bottles with screw-on caps upright to prevent leakage.
- To serve Absinthe using the French method, slowly pour cold water over a cube of sugar resting on a slotted spoon placed over a glass containing a small portion of absinthe. The cold water dissolves the sugar, and the solution trickles into the glass causing the absinthe to *louche*—giving the spirit its misty, cloudy appearance.
- According to Mata Hari's Steve Raye, it's a good idea to familiarize oneself with the current categories of absinthe:

- Parisian (made from grand wormwood, *Artemisia absinthium*; what got banned, "Real" absinthe, naturally colored)
- Bohemian Style (reduced amounts of anise seed)
- Swiss (clear white liquid without artificial coloring, that clouds up strongly and develops the typical creamy bluish-white; also known as "La Bleue")
- Czech-Sinthe (a fabricated spirit, with artificial and natural ingredients mixed).



Absinthe field in Pontarlier, France.



that we ever made here, and we are going to continue to make it that way. This is what's going to help distinguish our absinthe from others. We have years of experience being able to distill things that are beautiful and complex, and we are proud that we can do that with our absinthe as we have done with Hangar One vodkas and our other spirits. What's even more interesting, however, is that there are several new absinthes coming up on the scene that are fantastic. There are enough ingredients in a authentic absinthe that all a good distiller needs to do is tweak a couple of those ingredients just a little bit to make it very different from somebody else's. Even with the six best absinthes on the market, you can tell each one of them apart blindfolded because they all integrate the ingredients a little differently resulting in subtle differences."

Garver, meanwhile, finds it is exciting to watch various accounts make Le Tourment Vert their own. "While absinthe was consumed in a very specific way 100 years ago, and has that allure and that history, never again will a beverage make such a dramatic comeback, back from being banned, in the way absinthe has," she notes. "100 years ago, absinthe was used in dashes and small doses in cocktails, because of its bitter taste due to anise and wormwood. In Le Tourment Vert, you can use a full ounce or two in cocktails and it still tastes great, thanks to its flavor profile and lower alcohol content. We can even say it can be considered the best cocktail absinthe on the market today because we are promoting the fact you can 'torment' any cocktail with our absinthe."

The Blackmint Distillery and Alta-

mar Brands, LLC has partnered to bring Kübler, the first authentic Swiss Absinthe, to the United States market in nearly 100 years. Named for founder Yves Kübler, the four-generations old brand became available to consumers in New York City, Las Vegas, Boston, Los Angeles and San Francisco in late 2007. Last year, the brand moved into Chicago, Miami, Baltimore, Nashville, New Orleans, Scottsdale, and Kentucky, and is expected to move into other top tier markets in the near future. In 2004, when the Swiss government overturned the ban, the founder's great grandson, Yves Kübler went back into business producing original formula. At precisely the same time, he and his Export Director, Peter Karl, set their sights on the United States, and after many years of negotiations and thousands of hours of work, convinced the US government to allow the legal sale of authentic Kübler Absinthe in this country. "Dispelling the myths of absinthe was not an easy proposition," says Karl, "but in the end science prevailed and with the US authorities approval, we are able to bring our original formula to American consumers."

Artisan Imports, meanwhile, has brought Artemisia Superior Absinthe Vert into the U.S. This brand simultaneously embraces its traditional roots (using traditional European methods to bring the spirit based on an 1855 recipe to life) and modern demand for hand-crafted, artisan-hewn products.

The Artists' Colony



While reps from different brands may have differing opinions and facts on hand



Homage to Degas, one of the advertising executions for Grande Absente, which celebrates the 19th century Impressionist art and absinthe.



Pernod Fils advertisement by Charles Maire, circa 1901.

about what makes absinthe real, and when Americans were first able to enjoy the legend in a modern context, they all agree that artistry in production, from the collection and maceration of herbs to the bottles and labeling need to be executed in a way that is strictly artisanal, made with a definitive human touch.

“When a distiller has eleven or twelve really loud flavors and aromas (inherent in the ingredients) and every single one wants to dominate, it is his or her challenge to get all of them to integrate and play nicely on the palate,” affirms Winters of his work on St. George Absinthe Verte. “That’s where the real art for the distiller comes in, knowing exactly how much to use of each element and focusing on each flavor accordingly.”

“We want to be sure that we have the highest quality absinthes we can make from the best ingredients in our bottles, and we take our production methods very seriously,” says Nikola on behalf of Grande Absente. At the end of the day, consumers will either like it or hate it, so we want to present them the best product we can. Our recipe is from the south of France dating back to 1860, and we use the original still and adhere to the original artisanal methods and ingredients when making Grande Absente. We try to keep our packaging authentic to the art, history and legend, down to the slotted spoon to promote the ritual of the louche. Our packaging is also connected to artists, we have an artist series year-round gift box where artists did paintings for us and we worked that into the packaging design. Grande Absente’s higher-

end product will launch a homage advertising campaign that will insert our bottle into famous paintings.”

Packaging and marketing aside, Gurfein cautions that it is very easy to throw around words like artisanal, hand-crafted, handmade, because they are not susceptible to being disproved easily. “We have folks in France working at a 170 year-old distillery with equipment dating back to when the distillery was built,” he attests, referring to video clips and photos that are part of their marketing efforts. “There is no better way to explain artisanal than showing how something is literally made by hand. No machines other than bottling, and Breaux personally supervising the picking of the herbs. Even with the recession, premiumization of spirits has been a strong trend, as consumers want real value for their money. \$59.99, our retail price, is high because of the ingredients Ted uses and the artisanal way it is made, yet it is also a fair price considering all the work that goes into making it the proper way. The premium quality puts Lucid Absinthe Supérieure in the thick of what consumers in general have gravitated toward in the last few years—products that provide value through their quality, even though they are priced higher and produced in lower quantities.”

Breaux calls attention to the fact in the nearly 100 years since Absinthe’s ban, spirits producers lost sight of artisanal ways in their efforts to make things cheaper, more modernized and able to produce in greater volume. While the gradual changes resulted

in products industrial in nature and devoid of any real quality, consumers and clients immersed in the cocktail culture are looking keenly to bring fresh ingredients and authenticity back into their lives. Absinthes like those made available through Viridian address the need to get back to quality and to nature.

“Anybody who cares about what they spend and what they get for the money will reject artificial and industrially produced products,” maintains Breaux. “Absinthe is the hot new ‘old’ spirit, with the distinctive flavors of anise and herbs distinguishing them from industrial modern spirits. Modern mixologists are on the forefront of generating a wider appreciation for the interesting, unique flavor of absinthe. While it is a challenging flavor to work with, mixologists are inspired by the challenge, and they have come up with modern absinthe drinks. Back in the day, there was one style of absinthe that prevailed, the Franco-Swiss style. Today, just like the gin category, there are now modern distillers in the US and Europe that are stretching the category. American producers, for example, are putting out Absinthe nouveau, something that while recognizable and authentic as absinthe has a distinctive, non traditional twist. It is good for the category because it broadens the spectrum. Some of these small distillery-produced absinthes lend themselves better to mixology than the “louche” style of traditional distilleries. It is out of necessity that these small distillers have widened the category. ■