

Absinthe: The Bliss, Curse and Renaissance

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ABSTRACT

This study recognizes in essence Absinthe's ambivalent history, glory, nonsensical prohibition and renaissance. It identifies fallacies surrounding the botanical spirit and brings out how Absinthe was targeted, vilified and accused of psychosis, violence, public health disorders & societal problems, based merely on anecdotal evidence against pharmacological reality. With tide turned and chips heavily stacked against, the green fairy was banned almost worldwide. Heavily influenced and deceptive claims on Thujone, a prime constituent and its neurotoxic effects are no way linked and scientifically validated. This largely establishes that Absintheurs with moderate consumption of legally defined drink has very little to fear. Mainly down to Absinthe advocates on the front line, getting to their objectives and driving the renaissance, Green fairy earned its share in line with the honorable reputation. With Absinthe legal again and the spirit gaining ground in the global market place, sitting back with a glass of absinthe is again a stylized activity.

KEYWORD: Absinthe, Thujone, Wormwood, Spirit, Absintheur, Aficionado

Absinthe, a Wormwood flavoured distilled liquor has deep roots in European's cultural realm. Thujone, a Wormwood constituent and one of the most famed ingredients drew fire for societal crimes and severe health disorders. Absinthe was implicated and considered a psychoactive drink, more perilous than other alcoholic beverages leading to its restriction in the early 19th century. The Spirit's legacy revived and lost glory regained after a century-long ban, thanks to the sustained and systematic efforts of Absinthe advocates.

INTRODUCTION

Absinthe was first developed by Madame Henroid in Couvet, Val-de Travers district of Switzerland in the late 18th century as a concoction of regional herbs. The concoction was reworked by Dr. Pierre Ordinaire, a French physician in Couvet, as an all-cure herbal remedy for his patients. After Dr. Ordinaire's death, the recipe was followed by Henry Louis Pernod, the founder of the first French Absinthe distillery in 1805. For over 200 years, people in this area regard Absinthe as a part of their life. The demand for Absinthe skyrocketed in neighbouring France owing to increased recognition and wide acceptance in Switzerland, increasing annual imports to two million gallons [1]. Between 1875 and 1913, the yearly consumption of absinthe increased many folds among French people. With popularity surging, Absinthe was declared a national drink of France in the 19th century.

THE HOLY TRINITY

Production of traditional Absinthe involves macerating herbs in high proof grain or white grape alcohol and

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redistilling in Alembic stills. Spirit's stylistic taste is primarily contributed by the holy trinity of three elementary herbs - Grand Wormwood, Green Anise and Florence Fennel. In Addition, the recipe has a mixture of other flavor and aroma enhancing herbs-Hyssop, Lemon Balm, Angelica, Stinging Nettles, Peppermint, Coriander, Veronica, Petite Wormwood, Dittany Leaves, Nutmeg, Calamus Aromaticus and Chamomile. Distillers closely guard their recipes and use different concoction in line with their flavor profile. Wormwood plant with a binomial name "Artemisia absinthium" is a wild plant native to Europe, Asia & Africa. Being one of the fundamental ingredients, it contributes bitter notes to the drink. Green Anise makes beverage palatable by contributing sweetness and Florence Fennel introduces a cooling effect that reduces the warmth of the alcohol.

GREEN FAIRY - THE BLISS

The recorded history of Wormwood use stems back to 1550 BC in Egypt. Hippocrates, Philosophers of ancient Greek prescribed the herb for a variety of maladies [2]. Wormwood has been known for centuries in the Central European community for its healing properties. It was extensively prescribed for stimulating hunger and treatment of rheumatic disorders, fever, dysmenorrhea, jaundice and anaemia. Wormwood having anti-parasitic, anti-malarial and fumigative properties helped England fight deadly Plague in 1665. Between 1830 and 1840, French troops deployed in northern Africa were given wine with Wormwood extract to treat fevers & prevent infections. When soldiers returned in 1847, they brought Wormwood taste home. By 1860, Absinthe enjoyed increased patronage in French bars,

bistros and coffee shops to the extent that the hour of the early evening was called "The Green Hour" [3,4]. The surging trend popularized the drink and brought it to the mainstream. By 1849, France witnessed the emergence of Absinthe in retail markets. During 1880, French vineyards were ravaged by Phylloxera and Oidium infestations. Wine prices elevated owing to the reduction in production and increased consumer demand. French consumers with special affection for Aniseed flavoured beverages in particular, turned to Absinthe as a cheaper and more alcoholic alternative [5]. During the early 19th century, Absinthe was preferred over wine in French society and the liquor was a beverage of choice for French and bohemian elite class. Cashing in on the existing commercial opportunity, Absinthe distillers switched from grape alcohol to cheaper grain alcohol slashing the production cost, eventually reducing retail prices. In the early 19th century, the Spirit rose to epic proportions owing to superlative growth in Absinthe's French retail market. Numerous prominent French artists and writers embraced the green elixir and featured the drink in their works. Intellectuals like Rimbaud and Verlaine highly praised and lauded the green drink to improve senses, lift mood, promote creativity and feeling of well being. Prominent French artist Paul appraised Absinthe by saying "Absinthe is the only decent drink that suits an artist". Famous L' Absinthe painting by prominent French artist Edgar Degas, portraying a man and a woman drinking Absinthe, was displayed in Musee D' Orsay Museum, Paris (Figure 1). The artwork earned critical acclaim and Absinthe achieved global attention. Bestselling author Marie Corelli in her novel Wormwood: A Drama of Paris, sang the praise of Absinthe as "Let me be mad, then, by all means! mad with the madness of Absinthe, the wildest, most luxurious madness in the world! Vive la folie! Vive l'amour! Vive l'animalisme! Vive le Diable!" [6].

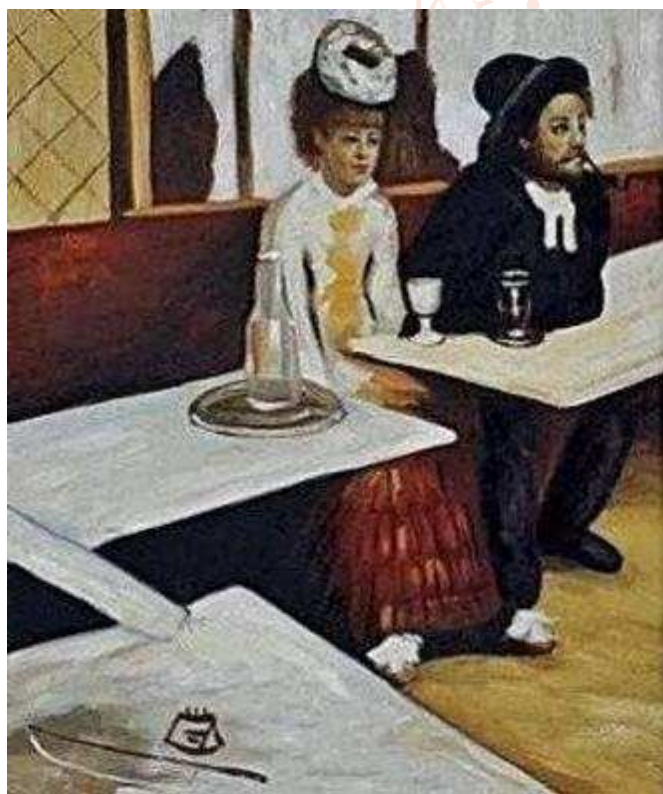


Figure 1: L' Absinthe Painting Exhibited in 1876

GREEN ELIXIR - THE CURSE

Unexpectedly, Absinthe's surging popularity turned out to be the influential factor behind its victimization. With increasing demand and retail sales, habitual and chronic Absinthe abuse (known as Absinthism) posed a serious health risk. The perceived Absinthism threat became reality by unscrupulous distillers and producers who engaged in unethical business behaviours practicing non-traditional distillation techniques, using methanol rich head and tail cuts, synthetic colourants and artificial clouding agents. Falsified spirit with higher impurities and weaker alcoholic content flooded the market, putting public health at stake. [7,8]. On the flip side, to experience pleasant Absinthe effects, heavy episodic drinking became widespread. Binge drinking over time led to Thujone toxicity causing neurological abnormalities that incited societal crimes and imparting adverse health effects. Gripped with the fear of losing market share and driven by personal motives, powerful wine industry lobbyists and social conservatives united for an aggressive campaign in the late 1800s and early 1900s, closely associating Absinthe with psychotropic effects, epilepsy, tuberculosis, extreme violence, crime and social disorder. Independent research findings with no layers of application, negative propaganda and misleading advertisements demonized the beverage [9]. Absinthe was left with a deadly reputation and was viewed as a national threat. Henri Schmidt, a temperance leader heavily condemned the Spirit and in the report submitted to the Chamber of Deputies, called Absinthe "Madness in the Bottle". This added fuel to the fire and further slandered the spirit.

ABSINTHE MURDER - A DARK STORY

Jean Lanfray's case was the final nail in Absinthe's coffin. Jean Lanfray, a Swiss farmer and an Absinthe addict murdered his pregnant wife and two children in August 1905. Lanfray later committed suicide by hanging himself in the prison. Lanfray's lawyer and Albert Mahim, a Psychiatrist associated with the case, held Absinthe accountable for aggressive behavior, extreme temper and rage. The fact that Jean Lanfray drank excessive hard Spirits and wine along with Absinthe before the crime, was ignored and the Spirit was blamed for the homicide [10]. Shortly after the homicide, a petition with 82000 signatures was submitted urging the government to ban the Spirit. Absinthe was left to blame and the law banning Absinthe was passed. Three years after Lanfray's incident and with utmost priority to public health, the Swiss government imposed a ban on the liquor in 1908 and by 1915, the Spirit was exiled from France, a center of Absinthe subculture (Figure 2). Other European states subsequently imposed prohibitions with exception to Spain, England and Portugal where production and retail trade continued [11]. Following the outlaw and in countenance to the demand, Brand Pernod Ricard, produced Wormwood free absinthe with extra anise to quench the thirst for Aniseed-flavored drink.

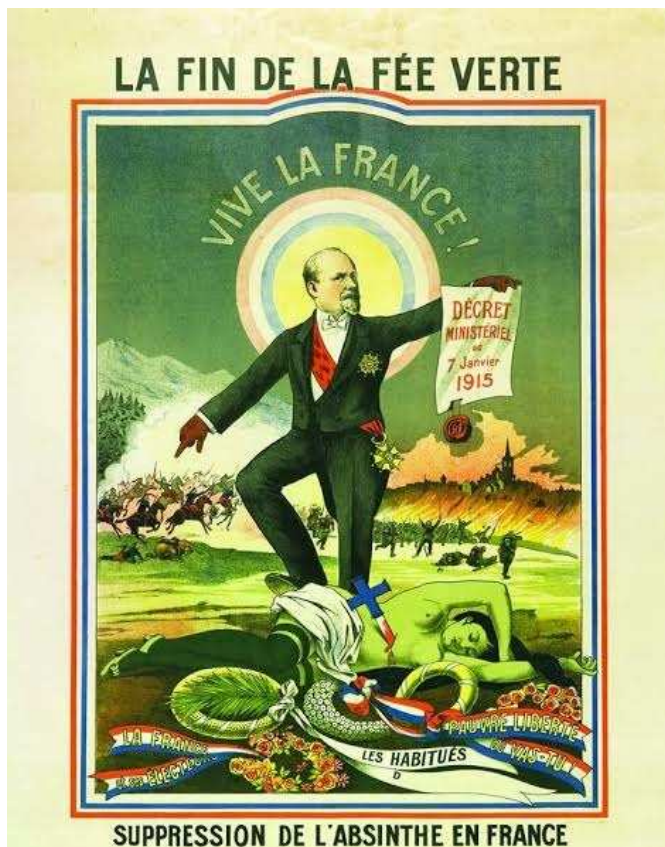


Figure 2: Absinthe ban in France

THE TALE OF RENAISSANCE

A THUJONE QUESTION - TECHNICALLY

The experiment conducted on animals by Dr. Valentine Magnan, at Saint Anne Asylum administering high doses of Wormwood essence caused physical disorders like hallucinations, trembling and violent reactions. Abolitionists based their protests on these findings without considering the fact that animal models were exposed to higher Thujone concentrations compared to Thujone levels in antique pre-ban Absinthe [12]. Thujone is a natural by-product of Wormwood whose overdose can be neurologically fatal, as reported with Absinthism. The case of one of the most famous Absintheurs, Vincent Van Gogh can be represented as a classic case of Absinthism. Gogh, a Dutch painter was reported to be an Absinthe addict and died of suicide. He got malnourished from excessive drinking, experienced hallucinations and was diagnosed with Congenital Psychosis, a neurological disorder [13].

One theory in 1975 claimed Thujone's molecular structure similar to that of Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), a natural psychoactive compound in Cannabis [14]. A scientific study by Meshler and Howlett investigating Thujone's toxicity established that Thujone is not as intoxicating as THC, refuting previous 1975 theory [15]. It was scientifically established that Thujone levels in the buds and leaves of the Wormwood plant used in Absinthe production are less than the stem and have no potency to cause neurological impairment and health disorders. It was also observed that pre-ban historic absinthe had lesser concentrations of Thujone compared to a legally defined level of 35 mg/liter [16]. Drinking legally defined Absinthe in moderation reported no neurotoxic effects [17]. The fact the Thujone concentrations are greatly reduced to lower levels towards the end of the distillation process should also be given due consideration. With heavy drinking, Thujone blocks Gamma-

Aminobutyric acid production in the brain causing convulsions and other neurological disorders. Consumption of high strength adulterated Absinthe and lucid drunkenness should be of greatest concern. Absinthe's acute neurological toxicity is directly proportional to frequency and amount of alcohol consumption, age, nutritional intake, quality of life and overall health. Another study CVUA Karlsruhe, Germany investigating Wormwood, did not find Thujone and hallucination connection [18]. With available scientifically validated data, the prospect of negative health effects from exposure to Thujone is strongly refuted.

GREEN FAIRY: RE-ESTABLISHED

George Rowley, owner of French Absinthe Brand "La Fée" was chiefly instrumental in Absinthe's revival and spearheading campaign seeking Spirit's legalization. Many other Absinthe advocates, loyalists and distillers jumped on the bandwagon. Working closely with the government, the dedicated team under Rowley's leadership standardized the concoction, proposed guidelines on commercial production, presented scientific research findings and educated on Spirit's authenticity and provenance. Team La Fée achieved the much awaited when the European Union's food and beverage laws were revised and the ban was rolled back. Swiss government removed the barriers in March 2005. In the year 2013, France government decriminalized the spirit. Legalization of production, consumption and retail trade in line with new regulations, subsequently followed in other European states like Austria, Germany, Netherland and Belgium. European Union regulated Thujone content at a maximum permissible limit of 35 mg/L. In the United States, maximum permissible limit stayed at 10 mg/L under federal laws and Canada capping at varying levels between 6-15 mg/KG based on provincial requirements. The liquor's reputation was reestablished and the green elixir was back on retail shelves. Adding to spirit's glory, Absinthe appeared in many popular Hollywood flicks like Moulin Rouge, From Hell, Eurotrip and Van Helsing. The drink was also featured in "Best of Wines 2008" Edition with prominence.

ABSINTHIANA - TRADITIONAL

The traditional style of preparing the drink is by pouring Absinthe shot into a chilled Pontarlier Reservoir glass. An Absinthe dedicated spoon is placed on the glass with a sugar cube on top. Iced water is gently dripped over the sugar cube using a fountain. The sweetened water flows through and dilutes the Spirit. This expands aromas and creates an opaque effect known as Absinthe Louche. In comparison to whiskey's forty percent alcohol by volume, Absinthe alcoholic strength is on the higher side, typically between 55-75 percent. This requires the beverage to be diluted with water before drinking. True absinthe always demonstrates the opaque effect when diluted. Slowly sipping Absinthe reveals its true nature and prevents alcohol from overpowering delicate herbal notes.

CONCLUSION

Absinthe had an interesting and ambivalent history with the witness to historical artisans and intellectuals having a love affair with the Spirit. It experienced a resurgence and started enjoying patronage in local and international markets. Through stricter quality control and education on responsible drinking, Absintheurs could be saved from fatal Absinthe Poisoning. New Spirit regulations mandate distilleries to put control measures to screen batches and

adhere to permissible Thujone levels. Absinthe with legally capped Thujone concentrations has no potency to cause insanity when standard drinking guidelines are observed. Absinthism, the root cause is much more of a moral disorder similar to alcoholism rather than Absinthe influenced illness. The Green Fairy comes back to life after over a century, blessing Absintheurs with a mystique feeling, they always cherished. The botanically driven liquor is definitely worth experiencing escapism at its very best that truly delights the senses.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares that he has no competing interests.

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