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New Orleans cocktail culture, but missing from it for decades, is back. At the tasting, which was part of the New Orleans culinary and cocktail festival, Tales of the Cocktail, guests clamored for it and lined up deep in the courtyard to try one of the four brands being poured.

The event was titled “The Revival of the Green Hour,” a nod to the French L’Heure Verte. During the Belle Époque (French for the “Beautiful Era,” the time around the turn of the 20th century that is sometimes referred to as the “golden age”), absinthe was famous as the drink of choice for artists, writers and poets. Not only the creative types enjoyed it—thousands of “ordinary” people customarily imbibed the emerald-colored liquor before dinner daily during what they called the “green” hour, rather than the “happy” or “cocktail” hour.

Parisians by the thousands drank absinthe at sidewalk cafés. Gwydion Stone is founder and proprietor of the WormwoodSociety.org, an online forum and informational website for absinthe enthusiasts. He’s also an absinthe distiller who handed

ABSINTHE

A Spirit Returns to New Orleans

by Stephen Faure

THERE IS A PARISIAN AIR to the little import and gift shop on Royal Street—the store manager answers the phone “Bonjour!” Earlier this year, the atmosphere was even more Parisian, as an intoxicating scent filled the air inside and spilled out the front door onto Rue Royale.

At a tasting held in the courtyard of La Maison d’Absinthe, genuine absinthe is served in a reproduction French glass; the bulb at the bottom provides for a perfect measure.

That licorice-tinged aroma provided those arriving at La Maison d’Absinthe (formerly Vive La France) a glimpse into the event taking place in the shop’s courtyard. With sharpened thirsts, they were eager and impatient to sample the exotic and mysterious substance whose fragrance beckoned—absinthe.

Banned for 95 years, the spirit, synonymous with

out samples of his Marteau brand at the La Maison d’Absinthe event. Afterward, he said, “You know how that absinthe scent just drifted out of the courtyard to the street? Imagine Paris during the Belle Époque. At the height of its popularity, there were more than 30,000 cafés, bistros and bars in Paris serving absinthe to hundreds of thousands of people every evening. Imagine the aroma over the boulevards during the green hour.”

While Paris was the center of absinthe culture in France, “New Orleans was the epicenter of absinthe culture in the United States,” says T. A. Breaux. Breaux, a New Orleans native and an absinthe historian and distiller, is a chemist by trade. France

was the mother of Southeast Louisiana, and Paris the mother of New Orleans, so the parallels are unsurprising,” he says.

But wait. Absinthe makes you crazy, right?

“Absinthe Rend Fou”—Absinthe Makes You Crazy—proclaims a vintage French poster in the Absinthe Museum of America, which is housed in La Maison d’Absinthe. This public perception was one of several factors that caused absinthe to be banned in many European countries and the United States years before Prohibition took effect.

Thujone, a chemical in the absinthe ingredient grand wormwood that is toxic if consumed in large amounts, was thought to be the culprit. (The herb sage actually contains more thujone than wormwood; juniper berries, the primary flavoring in gin, also contain thujone.) Part of absinthe’s mystique is due to a misplaced belief that thujone is hallucinogenic.

While banned in the United States in 1912 and France in 1914, absinthe was always legal—and thujone levels were unregulated—in some countries. The resulting absinthes may not have been the highest quality. Stone notes, “Basically, they could fabricate a product with coloring and essential oils that may or may not contain wormwood and label it absinthe.” Unfortunately, these absinthes were heavily marketed with a “bad boy” image touting high thujone levels, thus creating a mystique around a myth.

Why has it been “unbanned?” Modern chemists such as Breaux and others proved that in absinthe produced by the traditional method of distilling whole herbs both before the ban (occasionally, vintage bottles are discovered in storage) and today, thujone levels fall below 10ppm, the legally defined limit in both the United States and the European Union. In March 2007, Breaux’s Lucid became the first post-ban absinthe made with grand wormwood to be approved for sale by the United States.

MODERN ABSINTHE PRODUCTION

Breaux became interested in absinthe while working as a research chemist in New Orleans. One day, his boss mentioned absinthe. “I asked him what that was. He said, ‘You know, it’s that green liquor that makes people crazy.’ When he said that, it precipitated a chain of events that changed my life forever.”

Obsessed with learning all he could about

absinthe, he tried making his own, but had nothing to use for comparison. Then he acquired a bottle of vintage absinthe, which in 1997 was unheard of. As he drew samples to taste it, he knew there was more to it than the stuff he was making. It was more than he imagined it would be. “I was amazed and devastated at the same time,” he remembers. He decided to analyze the old absinthe. “I found that given enough time and patience, I could reverse engineer the vintage absinthe. I also learned I could debunk all the bad things that had been said about it for the past 150 years.”

By analyzing varieties of vintage absinthes, Breaux has come to formulate and manufacture five brands of absinthe. Four are in his super-premium-line Jade, winner of multiple international awards, in which he does his best to recreate the best labels of the Belle Époque. The fifth, Lucid, though mass-produced, is still made using turn-of-the-century methods.

He personally distills each batch of his Jade absinthes at the Combiar distillery in Samaur, France, using the same techniques and equipment used in 19th century France. The Combiar distillery is itself a landmark and working museum; the orange liqueur Triple Sec was first made there, and its ironwork was designed and built by the man behind the Eiffel tower, Gustave Eiffel.

“We really have to congratulate the original distillers and recognize that a century ago, absinthe was a beautiful spirit that was appreciated by millions. I want to give people a taste of the spirit of the Belle Époque.”

Breaux’s Jade Absinthe Nouvelle-Orléans is a tribute to the city and a direct link to its French heritage. With the slogan “L’Esprit du Vieux Carre” on the label, Breaux created a vintage-style absinthe, adding his own touch, a spicy twist, to the product. He was inspired by New Orleans’ history and absinthe’s roots as a medicinal product. Nouvelle-Orléans will be the first of the Jade absinthes available in the United States; it >>

Grand wormwood awaits distillation into absinthe.



photo courtesy Jade Absinthe, LLC

should be in stores in time for Christmas.

Absinthe's room-and-street-filling licorice scent is distinctively sweet. However, there lingers behind it something that's not quite as sweet, but more herbal and difficult to place. While the licorice component comes from the anise and fennel seeds used in making it, that unfamiliar herbaceous note comes from the ingredient that makes the liquor absinthe—the grand wormwood plant, *Artemisia absinthium*.

"As Louisiana cooking has its 'holy trinity,' green anise, fennel seed and grand wormwood are the 'holy trinity' of absinthe," Breaux explains. "Without grand wormwood, it's not absinthe." The holy trinity and other flavoring herbs, seeds or roots—depending on the version of absinthe he is making—are soaked in alcohol for a time. The alcohol is then distilled, carrying with it the essential flavoring oils from the plants, but leaving behind much of the bitter flavor.

At this point, absinthe is a colorless liquid, and, indeed, some absinthes are sold blanche, or clear, in style. Green-tinted absinthe is produced by steeping a different set of herbs in the distilled product, adding new flavors and coloring it with chlorophyll in the process. This color gives rise to absinthe's nickname, "La Fée Verte," or the "Green Fairy."

ABSINTHE IN NEW ORLEANS

A brochure printed by Pernod Fils, France's leading absinthe distiller, told how absinthe was made popular in the mid-1800s by soldiers returning home

to France after war: "It was introduced into the remote areas for our soldiers for whom it neutralized the effects of fever produced by the bad quality of the water and the noxious miasmas of the marshes..." With such alleged properties, it's no wonder absinthe became the perfect prescription for 19th century New Orleans, a city awash with "noxious miasmas" from the swamps that surrounded it.

In fact, the world's first cocktail was created in New Orleans by Antoine Peychaud, a pharmacist who dispensed his medicinal bitters mixed with sugar, absinthe and cognac. Eventually, this became the Sazerac cocktail, its name having been picked up from the brand of cognac used. The drink is now usually made with rye whiskey or bourbon rather than cognac, and while absinthe was unavailable, substitutes like Legendre Herbsaint were used.

Today, the Sazerac is the official cocktail of New Orleans. Tales of the Cocktail's opening celebration in 2008, shortly after that proclamation, welcomed New Orleans' State Senator Edwin Murray and Representative Cedric Richmond, who were instrumental in passing the legislation recognizing the Sazerac's place in New Orleans history.

After toasting the Sazerac, Ann Tuennerman, Tales of the Cocktail founder and president, briefly touched on the week's events, and then announced the evening's tasting, Tales of the Cocktail Revives the Green Hour Absinthe Ritual, at La Maison d'Absinthe. The crowd exploded with cheers; it was obvious that those who came to honor the Sazerac were staying to try the absinthe.

Tuennerman later observed, with no small amount

of understatement, "When something is outlawed for 95 years, there's going to be a little buzz about it."

THE ABSINTHE RITUAL AND ACCOUTREMENTS

Collector B. Raymond Bordelon and Maison d'Absinthe owner Cary Rene Bonnacaze are co-founders of the Absinthe Museum of America. Bordelon explains that absinthe, which is a very high-proof alcohol product (often 110-140 proof) was never taken straight, but always diluted with water. Many people added sugar as well.

Absinthe enthusiasts don't just pour a glass and stir. They perform "the absinthe ritual." "The whole culture is similar to the Japanese tea ceremony," says Bordelon. Various implements, the accoutrements to absinthe culture, evolved over time. Glasses were specially designed with marks or reservoirs built into them to indicate the proper amount, or dose, of absinthe.

Since sugar did not dissolve well in the high-proof liquor, imbibers invented spoons with a slotted area in the center of the handle. The spoon was laid across the top of the glass with the slotted area over the center. A sugar cube was placed on the slotted area, and cold water dripped over the sugar and into the absinthe below.

Bordelon says a disturbing trend has developed at this point in the preparation—soaking the sugar cube in absinthe and lighting it on fire before finishing the ritual.

"It's all show. It doesn't add any flavor and burns up the alcohol you've paid for. It can discolor your spoon and, well, it's dangerous. It's something that just was not done; it's not traditional," he says. "Friends don't let friends burn absinthe—and we sell a t-shirt that says that."

Dripping water over the sugar and into the glass causes the magic of the absinthe ritual to take place. It's the appearance of the "louche" or cloudiness, as cold water dripped through the sugar cube and into the absinthe brings out essential plant oils distilled into the absinthe. As the water drips, clouds bloom and disperse. The clouds grow denser as more water drips in, and then only a thin clear layer is left on the top. Finally, when the entire contents are cloudy, the absinthe is ready to be stirred and enjoyed.



photo © 2008 Stephen Faure

Water not only dilutes the strong spirit, it transforms it. In color, it changes from a bright green to an opalescent emerald color, or, if a clear absinthe, to a pearly-blue cloud. Water also develops the absinthe's fragrance as the essential oils come out of solution. It radiates out of the glass and, as noted before, fills the room.

Absinthe spoons eventually evolved from having slots or holes in the handle to trowel-like devices, with slots in the blade portion of the spoon. The variety in the design and styling of absinthe spoons and glasses, as well as the fountains and other devices crafted to drip water into absinthe, is amazing. Many are works of art in their own right. The Absinthe Museum of America houses Bordelon and Bonnacaze's collection of these artifacts, called absinthiana by collectors.

Bonnacaze started out with the purchase, years ago, of one vintage spoon that sparked his imagination. When he stumbled upon it, he had no idea what it was. He remembers, "I was pretty curious why you would need this special spoon to drink this old liquor."

Bordelon also started his collection with a similar find of one spoon in a shop. His curiosity grew further as he bought and renovated old New Orleans >>

A marble absinthe fountain, similar to those made famous at the Old Absinthe House, along with vintage spoons and glasses on display in the Absinthe Museum of America at La Maison d'Absinthe.



Right: T. A. Breaux demonstrating the absinthe ritual among the vintage spoons, fountains and other absinthiana found at the Absinthe Museum of America. Far right: Four of T. A. Breaux's handcrafted absinthe products.



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**WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND
WHERE TO GET IT.**

There are no standards as to what products may or may not be sold as absinthe. Some may be flavored with essential oils, rather than artisanally produced. Ask questions. If your retailer doesn't know what's what, do some research online. The WormwoodSociety.org and Oxygenee.com are two sites offering product reviews and discussion forums.

Absinthe is readily available on the northshore. Lucid and Kübler (a clear Swiss-made absinthe) are available in most outlets. Acquistapace's Covington Supermarket has been ahead of the curve. Adam Acquistapace says they've been selling Lucid since November 2007. "People started coming in from all over the place for it," he says. "Lucid has sold extremely well." The store now sells two other brands in addition to Lucid and Adam's preferred brand, Kübler, and will carry more brands as they become available.

Wine and spirits consultant Charles Buchtel of Martin Wine Cellar took an interest in absinthe when he first started with the company. "I do think the story behind it is interesting. The customers who buy it are all over the spectrum. A lot of younger folks are trying it for the first time; also, a lot of older folks who had heard about it and always wanted to try it. It's a very diverse crowd."

Buchtel says Martin's customers come with a lot of questions, and sometimes, misconceptions. "A lot of people inquire about the alleged hallucinogenic properties. I'm pretty straightforward and tell people that it's high in alcohol content, but if they're looking for something to get high on, they should look someplace else."

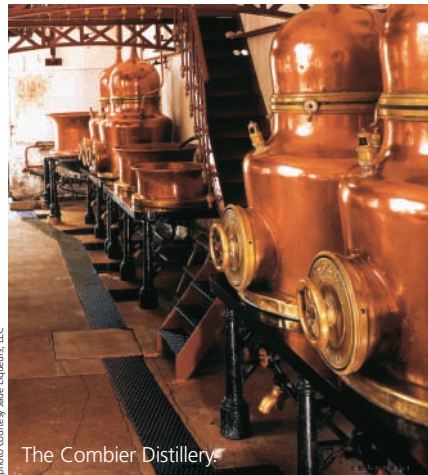


photo courtesy Jake Lippman, LLC

homes. "Absinthe was very popular in New Orleans. It was imported to the city, and the firm of Jung and Wulff distilled absinthe here. It's also quite common to find absinthe bottles when digging out old privies." A room in Bordelon's Uptown home is now a fully equipped absinthe bar, complete with paint peeling off the plaster on one wall in homage to the Old Absinthe House on Bourbon Street.

After increasing his collection to more than 400 spoons and 100 glasses, Bonnacaze began selling some of his vintage absinthiana in his shop, Vive La France. Relatives in France were on the lookout for absinthiana and shipped items to him that they found. He also traveled there a few times a year and scoured flea markets for items to add to his collection.

On one trip, he met a gentleman who manufactured hand-blown reproductions of the same antique glassware Bonnacaze had been collecting. Bonnacaze became his U.S. distributor. He now sells reproduction glassware, spoons, coasters and fountains online at lamaisondabsinthe.com, and has converted his Vive La France gift shop into the absinthe-ware emporium La Maison d'Absinthe. The back rooms of the shop now house the Absinthe Museum of America, containing his and Bordelon's collections.

A DRINK FROM THE PAST

The Wormwood Society's Gwydion Stone has been crafting his own brand of absinthe, Marteau, in a Swiss distillery for a few years. He arrived at his distilling techniques and Marteau's formula after studying 19th century distillery manuals and recipes. Marteau is now on sale in the United States, where he's begun artisanal production of it at a distillery in Oregon, using grand wormwood grown especially for him in Montana.

In discussing La Maison d'Absinthe and the Absinthe Museum of America's transformation from its prior status as a gift shop, the issue of the French Quarter Commission's approval of the name and signage change came up. Stone was curious; the process seemed to have taken a long time. He asked, "Are they really that meticulous?" He was pleased to hear commission members are sticklers for preservation.

Stone was then told of a recent example of the commitment to preservation that is dear to the French Quarter's residents and businesses. When planning its new archive and exhibition space for the Williams Research Center on Conti Street, the Historic New Orleans Collection searched the city's notarial archive. There it found the drawing of a hotel that stood on the site in the 1850s. The Collection recreated the hotel's façade when it designed the research center's addition.

Stone appreciated that story. "That's the approach I take with my absinthe. I want to point to it, and say precisely, 'This is what people were drinking 100 years ago.'"

**Luli and Me Red Smocked
Christmas Dress**

She will be all set for Christmas Eve service or Christmas dinner at Grandma's in this traditional smocked dress by Luli and Me. The dress has smocking across the bodice in varying shades of green. A Peter Pan collar piped in green and a large back bow complete the classic look. \$85. A little-sister bubble is available in sizes 3 months to 24 months. \$51.

Cupcake—A Children's Boutique,
Mandeville, 674-5590.

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