



The Green Fairy

IT'S ON THE LIPS OF SOME OF THE WORLD'S MOST DARING CELEBRITIES. ROCK STAR TOMMY LEE CAN'T GET ENOUGH OF IT. JOHNNY DEPP DRINKS IT WITH HIS PAL MARILYN MANSON. BUT WHY IS ABSINTHE, THE LONG-PROHIBITED LIQUOR ALSO KNOWN AS "THE GREEN FAIRY," MAKING A COMEBACK NOW?

— RON SHIPMON

After nearly a century of prohibition, Lucid (right) is the first absinthe legally available in the U.S. For \$59.95 (for a 750ml bottle), you could be drinking what the stars of the art world were drinking at the turn of the 20th century — and what celebrities and rock stars are drinking at the turn of the 21st.

Baz Luhrmann's 2001 film *Moulin Rouge!*, set in 19th century Paris, Ewan McGregor's character sips a glass of absinthe. Then Nicole Kidman appears as the "Green Fairy," the legendary temptress associated with the opaque green liquor, and she convinces him to consume more, promising magic and phantasmagorical splendor. The next sip sets him all a-twitter, her promise fulfilled.

Though the scene lasts less than three minutes, it encapsulates the danger, seduction and alleged depths of degeneration which have long been linked to this drink. Absinthe is a liquor distilled from herbs, including wormwood (*Artemisia absinthium*), anise and fennel (which gives the drink its distinctive color and licorice taste). It was first introduced in Switzerland as an elixir; by the late 18th century, it was a popular herbal remedy in France.

Absinthe later caught on with artists and the intellectual world; as a result, it was immortalized in the paintings of artists like Pablo Picasso, Manet and Degas, who referred to their liquid inspiration as the "Fée Verte" (Green Fairy) because they believed it gave them hallucinogenic visions and produced clarifying effects on the mind. At that time, absinthe was cheap and readily available; at its height, the French chugged it faster than frat boys at a keg party; at its height, the French chugged it faster than frat boys at a keg party — to the tune of 36 million liters a year.

BANNED THEN DELIVERED

Shortly after the turn of the 20th century, the story of this Green Fairy took a sharp turn. Because absinthe also contained thujone — a potentially toxic compound said to have caused insanity, murder and licentious behavior — several European countries banned the liquor. The U.S. followed in 1912, restricting absinthe's availability but heightening its bad reputation.

Subsequently, modern science debunked many myths surrounding absinthe, including the idea that it contains large amounts of hallucinogenic thujone. In 1988, France quietly lifted its ban on absinthe production and it returned to the market, though it was still banned in the United States. Thrill-seeking American absinthe drinkers worked around the ban by imbibing abroad, ordering imported bottles off the Internet or smuggling them back from Eastern Europe.

In 2007, the United States finally lifted its ban, making genuine absinthe available in America for the first time in nearly a

century, and New York-based Viridian Spirits began importing Lucid, the first legal, genuine absinthe, from France. To counter absinthe's negative reputation, Viridian turned to an American-born absinthe expert and historian, T.A. Breaux, to develop its formula. Lucid is made using authentic techniques including antique copper stills and pure French herbs. The new product has just a minute amount of thujone, allowing it to pass U.S. regulations.

AN ABSINTHE PRIMER

Since it is a whopping 124 proof, the Viridian recommends Lucid be consumed in the traditional manner, using the classic French absinthe ritual. First, pour a measure, or "dose," of absinthe into a glass. Place a sugar cube on a perforated spoon and lay it on the rim of the glass, and then slowly drip iced water onto the sugar cube. The sugar will gradually dissolve and drip, along with the water, into the absinthe. (The usual measure is three to four parts water added to one part of absinthe.) This process causes the green liquor to louche (meld) into an opaque opalescent white as the essential oils precipitate out of the alcoholic solution. The result promises drinkers heightened clarity combined with the usual effects of strong alcohol.

Part of absinthe's appeal will always be its reputation as the demon in the bottle, even though we now know that it can be consumed safely. That said, we must encourage you to enjoy it responsibly. Consuming too large a quantity of anything can be dangerous, and even water intoxication can kill (as evidenced by a recent tragic radio stunt). As always, everything in moderation — no matter how fantastic the ride promises to be. —

