

The best of spirits?

It should be so lucky. By appearing in the film "Moulin Rouge" Kylie Minogue, has probably done more than any barman, painter or poet to promote it and enhance its reputation, and there have been many of all three who have tried. Bars in London are serving it straight and in cocktails. It is the voice of the new bohemians. Hillary Clinton was snapped drinking it. Though banned in its traditional homeland after seemingly driving a number of people mad and, allegedly, causing van Gogh to cut his ear off, the scourge of the 19th Century, the Green Fairy, absinthe is back.

Just to put you in the know, Absinthe (Czech: absinth, Spanish: absento) is a strong herbal liqueur distilled with a number of herbs usually including anise, licorice, hyssop, veronica, fennel, lemon balm, angelica and wormwood, and was notoriously favoured by artist and poets such as Oscar Wilde, Vincent van Gogh, Paul Verlaine and Arthur Rimbaud, who spent part of his young life in Cyprus working and, perhaps, drinking absinthe. It is banned in France, but is available in the UK, the Czech Republic and Spain. With an alcohol content of at least 60% and a high content in essential oils, its taste is strong and bitter and the best way dull its bitterness is by mixing it into cocktails or adding caramelised sugar and ice cold water to it. Some people would rather ignite lighter fuel in their face then slap on a bottle of cologne than drink it, however. You could say it's an acquired taste.

Absinthe was created by a Frenchman, Dr Ordinaire, in Switzerland as a tonic. It was even drunk in large quantities by French soldiers, to prevent fever. Ordinaire sold his original recipe, and it was eventually acquired by Henri-Louis Pernod, though sadly Pernod no longer make absinthe, reinventing the recipe without the traditional main ingredient, wormwood, to produce their trademark drink.

This reinvention is common. Where it has become unavailable absinthe has been reinvented in a milder form. Ouzo, the aniseed based drink that is so popular in these parts, Pernod and Ricard are famous examples of pastis. The name comes from the word pastiche signifying an imitation or re-conceptualisation of a classic, in this case of absinthe.

Wormwood of course is the essential ingredient. Whilst the other ingredients, particularly the anise, liquorice and fennel produce the aniseed flavour and the louche (the clouding effect once water is added, similar to that of ouzo, but absent from many Czech brands of absinth), wormwood gives the drink its oomph, and its bitterness. Wormwood also contains the chemical thujone, similar in structure to THC, a psychoactive chemical found in cannabis, and when administered in large enough doses, it is known to cause, amongst other things, epileptic fits in lab animals. In smaller doses, thujone has very mild psychoactive properties. Most absinthe available nowadays contains less than 10ppm thujone, a tiny proportion, probably, compared to what the poets of the last century were downing.

And though these poets extolled the inspirational properties of the drink they dubbed the “Green Muse”, and artists everywhere loved to paint its opalescence, popular opinion soon turned against it, citing the “Green Demon” as the catalyst for a catalogue of sins.

And so it was for many decades, that absinthe apparently only survived in dictionaries and 19th Century art.

So why has the tide turned? Perhaps because people have realized that “absinthism” was merely alcoholism dressed in opal green, and that the drinker, not the drink is more often responsible. Perhaps it was because the newly re-declared Czech Republic urgently wanted to promote its produce. Perhaps, simply, a few people dared to be different. All one can say is “Vive la difference”. Good quality absinthe, mixed with caramel and water is a truly sinful pleasure. And well worth trying. After all, there’s more to life than scotch.

At least one website claims that absinthe is a “Guaranteed Aphrodisiac”. Reportedly the best Absinthe is La Fee. It is nearly 70% ABV, has a reportedly high thujone content (although unlike some Czech brands, stays within the EU maximum of 10 ppm), is very expensive and is available from Heathrow airport. Mari Mayans (Spain) is also considered good. Most Czech brands are quite bitter, if you like that kind of taste. Hapsburg Red (Bulgaria) has probably the highest alcohol content at 85%. Logan 100 has, reportedly 100ppm of thujone, closer, probably to what Rimbaud and co were drinking. Try them at our own risk.